

promoted among the Goths by previous emperors, as we shall see in a moment, so here was another deliberate rejection of Roman ideology. No low-level barbarian, Athanaric was a client king with a coherent agenda for renegotiating his relationship with the Roman Empire.

### Little Wolf

IF THE REAL PROFILE of Athanaric can be partially recovered from the distorting mirror of Themistius' speech, two astonishing manuscripts give us much more direct access to the Gothic world of the fourth century. The first is one of the greatest treasures to survive from antiquity: the *Codex Argenteus*. Now housed in the Uppsala University Library in Sweden, it is a luxury copy of a translation of the four Gospels into the Gothic language. Transcribed in Italy in the sixth century, the book originally comprised 336 pages. Only 187 survived at Uppsala, but much excitement accompanied the discovery of one more, in 1970, in a long-forgotten hiding-place for relics in the cathedral at Speyer in south-west Germany. The text is written in gold and silver ink on purple-dyed parchment of an exceptional fineness – it was made from the skin of newborn (or even unborn) calves. Ink, dye and parchment all mark this out as a colossally expensive book commissioned by an individual of the highest standing, quite likely Theoderic the Amal, Ostrogothic king of Italy in the sixth century. The second manuscript is more modest but, in its own way, equally extraordinary: a plain and quite badly damaged fifth-century text prosaically known as *Parisinus Latinus* 8907. Most of it is devoted to an account of the Council of Aquileia in 381, when Bishop Ambrose of Milan, a stalwart of what was just about to become Christian orthodoxy, defeated his opponents, and to the first two books of Ambrose's most famous work, the *De Fide* (*On the Faith*). Written into the margins of the *De Fide* is another work, known only from this battered manuscript: a commentary on Aquileia by Bishop Palladius of Ratiaria, one of Ambrose's opponents there. This commentary includes a letter written by Auxentius of Durostorum, which, together with the *Codex Argenteus*, illuminates the extraordinary achievements of one of Athanaric's humblest subjects: Ulfilas, the Little Wolf of the Goths.<sup>33</sup>

Born at the beginning of the fourth century, Ulfilas was the offspring of Roman prisoners living among the Tervingi. They were

part of a substantial community of captives taken by Goths during the late third century. At this point, Goths were launching seaborne attacks across the Black Sea from southern Russia into Roman Asia Minor. Ulfilas's family was taken from a small village called Sadagolthina near the city of Parnassus in Cappadocia, located on the northern shores of what is now Lake Tattu in central Turkey. His name, meaning 'Little Wolf', is unequivocally Gothic, showing that the captives adapted linguistically to their new situation; but they continued to use their own languages too. In addition to Gothic, Ulfilas grew up literate in both Latin and Greek, and Greek was probably his language of preference. That he had these accomplishments implies a great deal about the captives' living conditions. They probably formed a largely autonomous body of farmers, required to hand over a substantial portion of their produce to their Gothic masters but otherwise left more or less to their own devices. Quite a lot of them were firm Christians. Ulfilas, we are told, grew up and matured in his faith in this decidedly polyglot setting, becoming a junior clergyman with the rank of lector in the exiles' church. This kind of subject community is known to have existed in other barbarian kingdoms in late antiquity, and some were able to preserve a sense of difference over several generations. In the case of Ulfilas, the relatively obscure life of a second-generation involuntary immigrant was about to be transformed by the fact that the Tervingi happened to be the group of Goths settled closest to the Roman frontier at a moment when the Empire was busy converting itself to Christianity.

In the early 340s the emperor Constantius II decided to raise the stakes in the hostage situation in which Athanaric's father was currently ensnared. Flexing his political muscles in the way he was about to do was only possible, of course, because of the military dominance that Constantius' father Constantine had established over the Tervingi in the 330s. As one of several initiatives designed to show off his Christian piety, Constantius attempted to boost the fortunes of his fellow Christians living under non-Christian rule. He thus arranged for Ulfilas, already prominent among the prisoner community, to be ordained bishop 'for the Christians in Gothia', bringing him to Constantinople for the purpose in 341 as part of an embassy. Ulfilas then went back north of the Danube and for the next seven years ministered happily to his flock. But something went wrong and, in the winter of 347/8, when he found himself at the centre of a diplomatic crisis in Gotho-

Roman relations, he was expelled from Gothia by his Tervingian masters, along with a large number of his fellow Gothic Christians. Historians have guessed that he may have spread his message beyond the prisoner community to other Goths, but there was also a wider context. By 348, Constantius wanted to draw another military contingent from the Tervingi for the latest bout of Roman-Persian warfare, and accepting that his Christianizing initiative should stop was perhaps the price he had to pay for it. Nonetheless, Constantius went to the Danube and greeted Ulfilas 'as if he were Moses himself'.<sup>34</sup>

It might have seemed like the end, but it was only the beginning. Ulfilas and his followers were settled around the city of Nicopolis ad Istrum, close to the Danube frontier and still in contact with what must have been the many Christians who remained in Gothic territories. It was here that Ulfilas produced the Gothic Bible translation preserved in the *Codex Argenteus*. His method was simple – he gives a word-for-word rendering of a standard fourth-century Greek Bible text – and his translation owes more to Greek grammar and syntax than to that of the Goths. It was a prodigious feat. According to tradition, Ulfilas translated everything except the Old Testament Book of Kings, which he thought would only have encouraged the Goths to become even more warlike than they already were. A low-status subject member of the Gothic Tervingi had produced the first literary work in any Germanic language.<sup>35</sup>

This was one part of the Ulfilas story. The other is told in Auxentius' letter so uniquely preserved in *Parisinus Latinus* 8907. Constantine's conversion brought about extraordinary transformations within Christianity. Amongst other things, it became imperative for Christians, who no longer lived in communities mainly isolated from one another by the hostility of the Roman state, to define a set of doctrines. The process began at the Council of Nicaea in 325, where the relationship of God the Son to God the Father was defined as *homousios*: 'of the same substance/essence'. But this was just the start of the argument. The Nicene definition of the Christian faith only became fully accepted, after much argument, following the Council of Constantinople in 381, and for much of the intervening fifty-six years official Roman Christianity held to a much more traditional position, describing Christ as 'like' (*omoios*) or 'similar in substance/essence to' (*homoeousios*) God the Father.

Much effort in the interim had gone into constructing coalitions

between different Churchmen, many of whom had hitherto simply assumed that they believed the same things. They were now being forced to decide which of a range of theological positions best expressed their understanding of the faith. Into this arena, sometime after 348, strode Ulfilas. Auxentius' letter contains the statement of belief that Ulfilas left as his last will and testament, and succinctly explains the reasoning behind it. Ulfilas was one of the more traditional Christians: he found the Nicene definition unacceptable because it contradicted the scriptural evidence and seemed to leave little room for distinguishing God the Father from God the Son. In Auxentius' account:

In accordance with tradition and the authority of the Divine Scriptures, [Ulfilas] never concealed that this God [the Son] is in second place and the originator of all things from the Father and after the Father and on account of the Father and for the glory of the Father . . . holding as greater [than himself] God his own Father [John 14:28] – this he always made clear according to the Holy Gospel.

What's more, people listened. Again, in Auxentius' words:

Flourishing gloriously for forty years in the bishopric, [Ulfilas] preached unceasingly with apostolic grace in the Greek, Latin, and Gothic languages . . . bearing witness that there is but one flock of Christ our Lord and God . . . And all that he said, and all I have set down, is from the divine Scriptures: 'let him that readeth understand' [Matthew 24:15]. He left behind him several tractates and many commentaries in these three languages for the benefit of all those willing to accept it, and as his own eternal memorial and recompense.

Unfortunately, the tractates and commentaries haven't survived. Ulfilas ended up on the losing side of doctrinal debate and his works, like those of so many of his party, were not preserved. But we do know from Auxentius and other sources that he was heavily courted not only by Constantius but also by the eastern emperor Valens, and did eventually sign up to the doctrinal settlements they put forward in, respectively, 359 and 370. He also built around himself an influential group of non-Nicene Balkan bishops, who were a major force within the Church. Auxentius was one of these, and Palladius of Ratiaria



another. The last image we have is of Ulfilas riding into doctrinal battle yet again, at the age of seventy, at the Council of Constantinople in 381. This was his last hurrah, and the Council's decisions effectively consigned him and his followers to the footnotes of history. But that was not how it was in his own lifetime. This Gothic subject of humble origins was a major player in the doctrinal debates of the mid-fourth century.<sup>36</sup>

AGAIN, REALITY confounds image. Viewed through a Roman lens, barbarians were utterly incapable of rational thought or planning; sensualists, they lacked motive, apart from an overwhelming desire for the next fix. But our two fourth-century barbarians were neither stupid nor irrational. At the pinnacle of Gothic society, Athanaric and his councillors were faced with the brute reality of devising ways of coping with overwhelming Roman power. They could hope neither to defeat it in open conflict nor to insulate themselves from it. They could, however, formulate and pursue agendas designed to shape their relations with the Empire in the way that best suited them, while minimizing those aspects of Roman domination they found most oppressive. They could also be desirable allies in wartime and in civil conflict, and could sometimes manipulate matters for their own benefit. Lower down the social scale were communities literate in Greek and Latin who transmitted enough of current Christian culture to generate a man like Ulfilas.

The reality of Roman-Gothic relations was not, therefore, the unremitting conflict between absolute superior and inferior that Roman ideology required. The Romans still held themselves aloof, the dominant party, but Goths could be useful. The periodic conflict between them was part of a diplomatic dance that saw both sides taking steps to maximize their advantage. Barbarians weren't what they used to be. Even if cast firmly as junior members, the Goths were part of the Roman world.

### Client Kingdoms

THIS DIDN'T APPLY exclusively to the Goths on the Danube, even if most fourth-century Germanic societies are not so well documented as the Tervingi. Small-scale raiding into imperial territory was endemic.

The Saxon raid of 370 was perhaps more serious than some, but it wasn't just spin on 'Themistius' part that he ends his account of the Gothic war of 367-9 with a vignette of Valens fortifying those parts of the Lower Danube frontier that other emperors hadn't reached. He and his brother were active in both building fortifications and providing garrisons. But in the fourth century, major conflicts occurred only about once in a generation on Rome's European frontiers. One of the first acts of the emperor Constantine, in the 310s, was to undertake a major pacification of the Rhine frontier – the lands of the Franks and Alamanni (map 4). We know of no further serious conflict in this region until the early 350s. The trouble that broke out again in 364/5 was to do with a change in Roman policy (a unilateral cut in the foreign aid budget); otherwise, nothing of note occurred here before the end of the 370s. Further east, the Middle Danube frontier facing the Sarmatians, Quadi and Marcomanni saw a major Roman military intervention under the emperor Constantine, but much later in his reign, in the 330s. The next outbreak of violence there came in 357, and another in 374/5. On the Lower Danube, home to the Goths, the



settlement of the 330s gave, as we have seen, more or less thirty years of peace.

In each of these campaigns, the Romans - with greater or lesser difficulty - established their military dominance, sometimes just by pillaging widely enough to force submission, sometimes by victory in a set-piece battle. In 357, for instance, the emperor Julian led a Roman force of 13,000 men into action near the city of Strasbourg on the Roman side of the Rhine, against the assembled kings of the Alamanni. He won a stunning victory. Of the 35,000 opponents led by their pre-eminent overking, Chnodomarius, some 6,000 were left dead on the battlefield and countless others drowned trying to flee across the river, while the Romans lost a grand total of 243 soldiers and four high-ranking officers.<sup>37</sup> The battle is an excellent example of the continued effectiveness of the remodelled Roman army of the late imperial era. From the massacring of Saxon raiders in northern France to Constantine's subjugation of the Tervingi, this type of military dominance was the norm at all levels on Rome's European frontiers.

In one respect, such victories were an end in themselves. They punished and intimidated, and certainly the historian Ammianus considered that it was necessary to hit barbarians regularly to make them keep the peace. On another level entirely, however, military victory was the first act in constructing broader diplomatic settlements. After Strasbourg, Julian spent the next two years on the other side of the Rhine making separate peace treaties with various Alamannic kings, just as his co-emperor Constantius II was doing with other groups on the Middle Danube.

As we have seen, to the Roman public these treaties were all presented as following essentially the same pattern: the barbarians surrendered themselves completely (called in Latin an act of *deditio*) and were then graciously granted terms in a treaty (Latin, *foedus*), which made them imperial subjects. In reality, however, the details varied dramatically, both in the degree of subjection enforced and in the practical arrangements. Where the Romans were fully in control of the situation, as Constantius was on the Middle Danube in 357, they might well interfere in their opponents' political structures, dismantling confederations that appeared overly dangerous and promoting pliant sub-kings to independent authority as seemed to best suit Rome's long-term interests. The Romans also extracted recruits for their army as part of most agreements, sometimes stipulating as well

that larger bodies of men should be provided for particular campaigns. In 357/8 the emperor Julian also made the Alamanni pay reparations for the damage they had caused. These often took the form of grain supplies, as in this instance, but, where this was impossible, labour, wood for construction and cartage were demanded. Giving hostages, as happened with Athanaric's father, was also quite standard, and sometimes brought greater success. One Alamannic prince was so impressed with the Mediterranean religions he encountered on Roman soil that on his return he renamed his son Serapio in honour of the Egyptian god Serapis. Where the Romans were less in control, labour, raw materials and manpower might have to be paid for, and political structures that had evolved independently given the stamp of approval. Either way, beyond the defended frontier itself lay a belt of largely Germanic client kingdoms that were firmly part of the Roman world.<sup>38</sup>

This is not to say that these states were entirely under Roman control, or necessarily happy about being junior members of the Roman world order, as we have seen in the case of Athanaric. If other priorities got in the way, then barbarians could find themselves prospering, sometimes temporarily, sometimes more permanently. The early 350s, for instance, saw a rash of usurpations in the western half of the Empire, beginning with the murder of Constans, brother of the then eastern emperor Constantius. Constantius made it his priority to suppress the usurpers, and it was this which allowed Chnodomarius to build up the Alamannic army that would face Julian at Strasbourg. Once the usurpers had been put down, however, the Romans reined in, then utterly defeated, the Alamanni in two years of campaigning. Chnodomarius had been too aggressive, even seizing territory on the Roman bank of the Rhine, for the Romans to contemplate doing a deal. About a decade later, however, a new, pre-eminent leader of the Alamanni appeared: Macrianus. Valens' brother Valentinian spent half a decade trying to curb his power, making a number of kidnap and murder attempts. But, unlike Chnodomarius, Macrianus never let his ambitions stray on to Roman territory, so that when trouble brewed on the Middle Danube Valentinian could invite him, without too much loss of face, to a shipborne summit on the Rhine of the kind at which Valens had entertained Athanaric on the Danube. There he gave Roman approval to Macrianus' pre-eminence, and Macrianus proved a reliable Roman ally as long as he lived. These client kingdoms also had

political agendas that didn't involve Rome. Political life among the Alamanni had its own pattern, with kings regularly inviting each other to feasts. We hear too of wars between Alamanni and Franks, and between Alamanni and Burgundians, but nothing of their causes and consequences.<sup>39</sup>

Overall, then, Rome's relations with its fourth-century European frontier clients didn't fit entirely comfortably within the ideological boundaries set by the traditional image of the barbarian. The two parties now enjoyed reciprocal, if unequal, relations on every level. The client kingdoms traded with the Empire, provided manpower for its armies, and were regularly subject to both its diplomatic interference and its cultural influence. In return, each year they generally received aid; and, sometimes at least, were awarded a degree of respect. One striking feature is that treaties were regularly formalized according to norms of the client kingdom as well as those of the Roman state. The Germani had come a long way from the 'other' of Roman imaginations, even if the Empire's political elite had to pretend to Roman taxpayers that they hadn't. What has also become clear in recent years, is that this new order in Roman-German diplomatic relations was based on a series of profound transformations in Germanic society.

### *The Transformation of Germanic Europe*

THE WRITTEN EVIDENCE does contain some important clues that fundamental changes had occurred in the three and a half centuries separating Arminius from Athanaric. In the mid-third century, the west Germanic tribal names famous from the works of Tacitus suddenly disappear from our sources. Cherusci, Chatti and so forth were replaced by four new ones: Franks and Alamanni on the Rhine frontier, and Saxons and Burgundians further to the east (map 4). South-eastern Europe north of the Black Sea also now saw major political changes. By the fourth century, a huge swathe of territory from Rome's Danube frontier to the River Don was dominated by Gothic and other Germanic-speaking groups, making late Roman Germania even larger than its first-century counterpart.

The new situation beyond the Black Sea was generated by the migration of Germanic groups from the north-west, largely from what

is now central and northern Poland. In a series of independent, small-scale initiatives, between about AD 180 and 320, they had advanced around the outer fringes of the Carpathian Mountains. North of the Black Sea, the migrating groups were competing against each other, against indigenous populations such as the Dacian-speaking Carpi and Iranian-speaking Sarmatians, and against Roman garrison forces. The process was, not surprisingly, violent. The Empire decided to abandon its north Danubian province of Dacia in 275, and large numbers of Carpi were eventually resettled on Roman soil around the year 300. The violence spilled over on to Roman soil in regular raids, and it was during one of these that Ulphilas' parents were captured. The result was a series of largely Gothic-dominated political units, of which Athanaric's Tervingi were closest to the Danube. Beyond them, to the north and east, was an unknown number of others.<sup>40</sup> We have no idea of relative percentages, but the populations of these units were certainly mixed, with large numbers of Dacians and Sarmatians, not to mention Roman prisoners, living under the political umbrella of immigrant Goths and other Germani. The dominance of the Germanic immigrants is clear, however, from both Roman narrative sources and the linguistic evidence of Ulphilas' Bible.<sup>41</sup>

The significance of the name changes on the Rhine frontier and in its hinterland has been hotly disputed. Again, in all probability, immigration was involved. Burgundians do appear in Tacitus' account of first-century Germania, but significantly to the north-east of the region inhabited by their fourth-century namesakes. It is likely enough that some kind of migration was behind this shift of locale, but, as in the east, it probably did not take the form of a total replacement of the existing population.<sup>42</sup> Otherwise, we know that beneath the umbrella of the new names, some of the old groups continued to exist. Bructeri, Chatti, Ampsivarii and Cherusci are all reported in one source as belonging to the Frankish confederation of tribes, and detailed contemporary evidence shows that among the Alamanni several kings always ruled simultaneously, each with his own largely autonomous domain. At the battle of Strasbourg, for instance, Julian faced seven kings and ten princes.

At the same time, however, Alamannic society was by this date consistently throwing up an over-king: an individual in each generation who wielded more power than his peers. Chnodomarius, defeated by Julian at Strasbourg in 357, was one of these, as were Vadomarius at

whose rising power Roman policy was next directed, and Macrianus whom Valentinian was eventually forced to recognize in 374. It was not a hereditary position, and it is not recorded either how you became an over-king, or what benefits it brought you. Our Roman sources weren't interested enough to tell us. The chances are, however, that it involved some financial and military support upon demand, a development of some importance suggesting that the name changes of the third century had a real political significance. In Alamannic territories, a new superstructure had invaded the world of small independent political units characteristic of the first century. It is perfectly possible, although there is no evidence either way, that contemporary Franks and Saxons had developed similarly unifying institutions and habits. Further east, on the Danube, the Gothic Tervingi certainly had. Athanaric ruled a confederation that contained an unknown number of other kings and princes.<sup>43</sup>

But it wasn't merely in political structure that fourth-century Germania differed from its first-century counterpart. A range of archaeological evidence has shed new light on the deeper social and economic transformations that brought the world of Athanaric into being. The story begins in the muddy fields just east of the northern sector of Rome's Rhine frontier. In the early 1960s two small rural sites - Wijster in the Netherlands and Feddersen Wierde in Germany - were excavated. The findings were revolutionary. Both turned out to be farming settlements whose occupants practised mixed arable and pastoral agriculture, and both originated in the first century AD. The revolutionary aspect was that, for most of their history, these had been village communities with large numbers of houses occupied simultaneously: more than fifty in the case of Wijster, thirty at Feddersen Wierde. Furthermore, the settlements were occupied until the fifth century. The importance of this lies in what it implies about agricultural practice.

In the last few centuries BC, an extensive (rather than *intensive*) type of arable agriculture had prevailed across Germanic Europe. It alternated short periods of cultivation with long periods of fallow, and required a relatively large area of land to support a given population. These early Iron Age peoples lacked techniques for maintaining the fertility of their arable fields for prolonged production, and could use them for only a few years before moving on. Ploughing generally took the form of narrow, criss-crossed scrapings, rather than the turning-

over of a proper furrow so that weeds rot their nutrients back into the soil. Ash was the main fertilizer.

This is where the settlements of Feddersen Wierde and Wijster differ. For early in the Roman period, western Germani developed entirely new techniques, using the manure from their animals together, probably, with a more sophisticated kind of two-crop rotation scheme, both to increase yields and to keep the soil producing beyond the short term. For the first time in northern Europe, it thus became possible for human beings to live together in more or less permanent, clustered (or 'nucleated') settlements. Further north and east, the muck took longer to spread. In what is now Poland, the territories of the Wielbark and Przeworsk cultures, Germanic settlements remained small, short-lived and highly dispersed in the first two centuries AD. By the fourth, however, the new techniques had taken firm hold. Settlements north of the Black Sea, in areas dominated by the Goths, could be very substantial; the largest, Budestry, covered an area of thirty-five hectares. And enough pieces of ploughing equipment have been found to show that populations under Gothic control were now using iron coulter and ploughshares to turn the earth properly, if not to a great depth. Recent work has shown that villages had emerged in Scandinavia too. More intensive arable agriculture was on the march, and pollen diagrams confirm that between the birth of Christ and the fifth century, cereal pollens, at the expense of grass and tree pollens, reached an unprecedented high across wide areas of what is now Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany. Large tracts of new land were being brought into cultivation and worked with greater intensity.<sup>44</sup>

THE MAIN OUTCOME of all this was that the population of Germanic-dominated Europe increased massively over these Roman centuries. The basic constraint upon the size of any population is the availability of food. The Germanic agricultural revolution massively increased the amount available, and the increase in population shows up in the cemetery evidence. Cemeteries in continuous use throughout the Roman period all show dramatic rises in burial numbers from the later period.

Other sectors of the economy were also transformed. It is impossible to construct any kind of global overview, but iron production in Germania increased massively. In Poland, production at the two largest centres (in the Swietokrzyskie Mountains and in southern Mazovia)

generated in the Roman period 8–9 million kilos of raw iron. This was much more than could have been consumed by local Przeworsk populations, and plenty of smaller extraction and smelting sites have also been recovered, such as the fifteen or so fourth-century smithies clustered on the bank of a river at Sinicy in the Gothic-dominated Ukraine. Similarly with pottery: at the start of the Roman period, the Germani made all of theirs by hand, and for the most part, apparently, on a local and ad hoc basis. By the fourth century, this kind of pottery was being replaced by wheel-made wares, fired at much higher temperatures and hence more durable and more sophisticated. These were the products of highly skilled craftsmen. Whether Germanic potters could make a living just from their pottery is unclear, but economic diversification was certainly under way. The change was most marked in areas of production geared to elite consumption. Grave goods show that glass was a treasured item among Germanic populations in the early centuries AD. Up to about the year 300, all glass found in Germanic contexts was imported from the Roman Empire. This is presumably why it was so valued – rather like Italian handbags are now. In the 1960s, however, at Komarov on the outer fringes of the Carpathians, excavators unearthed a fourth-century glass foundry. Such was the quality of its widely distributed products (all the way from Norway to the Crimea) that they had previously been thought to be Roman imports. The glass factory, complete with moulds, left no doubt that they were made in Germania.

A similar story can be told about precious metals. Up to the birth of Christ, very few indigenously produced items of precious metalwork have been identified in Germanic settings, and in the first two centuries AD the vast majority of decorative items were still being produced in bronze only. By the fourth century, intricate silver safety-pins (*fibulae*) of a number of types had become familiar items of Germanic dress; and a few examples survive of work on a grander scale, notably one of the silver dishes of the famous treasure unearthed at Pietroasa in Romania in the late nineteenth century. How some, at least, of this ware was produced is suggested by evidence from the village of Birlad-Valea Seaca (in modern Romania), which probably fell within the territory ruled by Athanaric of the Tervingi. A characteristic grave good of Gothic territories north of the Black Sea is a composite comb made from deer antler. Combs had great cultural importance. Hair-styles were used by some Germanic groups to express either group

affiliations (as in the famous Suebian knot) or status (the long hair of the Merovingian rulers of the Franks). At Birlad-Valea Seaca, excavators unearthed nearly twenty huts containing combs and their constituent parts at different stages of production. Clearly, the entire village was devoted to manufacturing combs.<sup>45</sup>

There is much more that we'd like to know. Were these combs being produced commercially and exchanged, or was this some kind of subject village from which so many combs were demanded annually as tribute? Whatever the answer, there is no mistaking the extent and importance of the economic revolution that had transformed Germanic Europe by the fourth century. New skills were being developed, and goods were being distributed over far wider areas. Some of this production may have been non-commercial, goods being destined as gifts from one ruler to another, for example, but we know that the Tervingi traded extensively with the Roman world, as did peoples on the Rhine frontier. And although no coinage was produced in Germania, Roman coins were in plentiful circulation and could easily have provided a medium of exchange (already in the first century, Tacitus tells us, the Germani of the Rhine region were using good-quality Roman silver coins for this purpose).

ECONOMIC EXPANSION was accompanied by social revolution. Dominant social elites had not always existed in Germanic Europe, or, at least, their presence is not visible in the cemeteries which are the main source of our knowledge. For much of the first millennium BC, central and northern Europe was marked by a near-universal adherence to cremation as the main form of burial rite, and grave goods were pretty much the same everywhere: some tatty handmade pottery and the odd decorated pin. Only in the third century BC did richer burials (the grandest among them often referred to by their German term, *Fürstengraber*, 'princely graves') begin to appear, and they were few and far between. Once again it was first in the Roman imperial period that strikingly disparate quantities of goods began to be buried with different members of the same Germanic communities. In the west, rich graves cluster chronologically, with one group at the end of the first century AD and another at the end of the second. But it is extremely unlikely that 'princes' existed only at these isolated moments, so that there is no easy correlation between wealthy burials and social status. Further east, numbers of grave goods built up



similarly over the Roman period, but other means, such as huge mounds of stones, for marking out special status were first explored by second-century Germani. Unusually rich or grand burials say most, of course, about the pretensions and claims of those doing the burying, and it has been suggested that rich burials mark moments of intense social competition rather than moments of particular wealth.<sup>46</sup>

Fortunately, we have some less ambiguous evidence, some of it written, to help us interpret their longer-term significance. Although there is little sign in the first century of the hereditary transmission of political pre-eminence, and leadership even within small groupings was often multiple rather than individual, in the fourth century leadership among the Tervingi was handed down across three generations of the same family: in reverse order, Athanaric, his father the hostage, and the leader of the Tervingi who negotiated with Constantine. The best-informed of our Greek and Latin sources consistently label these leaders 'judges', but we don't know what title 'judge' translates. There is every reason to suppose that the power of the second stratum of kings and princes, beneath these overall leaders, was also hereditary. A similar pattern prevailed among the Alamanni. The position of over-king was not hereditary, as we noted earlier, not least because the Romans tended to remove those who achieved that status; but the status of Alamannic sub-kings clearly was. Mederichus, the high-status Alamannic hostage who changed his son's name to Serapio in honour of the Egyptian god, was the brother of Chnodomarius who led the Alamanni to defeat at Strasbourg in 357. Serapio also ruled as a king, and commanded the army's right wing in the battle – a sign, perhaps, that he was not overly enamoured of his exotically Mediterranean name. Succession may not have passed straightforwardly from father to son, but Chnodomarius, Mederichus and Serapio represent a royal clan with the ability to pass its power across the generations. The same was probably true of other Alamannic kings. When the Romans eliminated the over-king Vadomarius, considering him to pose too great a threat, they also removed his son Vithicabius from the scene, suggesting that the father's power was at least potentially heritable.<sup>47</sup>

Archaeological evidence, too, has shed important light on the fourth-century Germanic elite. Archaeologists have managed to identify, dotted across Germania, some of the centres and dwellings from which it exercised dominion. On the fringes of the Rhine valley, in prime Alamannic country, excavations on the hill known as the

Runderberg at the town of Urach have revealed a massive fourth-century timber rampart surrounding an ovoid area of seventy by fifty metres. Inside, several buildings were constructed, including a large timber hall, and smaller buildings dotted the hillside below. The hall was very much the kind of place where Alamannic leaders would have hosted gatherings for each other, and no doubt also feasted their retainers. Whether the smaller dwellings were occupied by retainers, craftsmen or ordinary Alamanni is not yet clear (the excavation has not been fully published). Further east, in Gothic-dominated territories, a few fortified centres, such as Alexandrovka, have been identified and partially explored. On most sites north of the Black Sea, Roman pottery sherds account for between 15 and 40 per cent of the total findings. At Alexandrovka, Roman, largely wine, amphorae sherds amount to 72 per cent; clearly a lot of entertaining went on here. What would appear to be the villa of another Gothic leader has been found at Kamenka-Antechrak. Consisting of four stone buildings with annexes and a courtyard, it covered an area of 3,800 square metres. Its extensive storage facilities and its above-average quantity of Roman pottery (over 50 per cent, this time consisting of both wine amphorae sherds and fine table wares) indicate that it, too, was a major consumption centre. At Pietroasa in Romania, finds of pottery and storage facilities show that a fourth-century Gothic leader reused an old Roman fort for similar purposes. This kind of separate elite dwelling was a new phenomenon.<sup>48</sup>

Clearly, therefore, the new wealth generated by the Germanic economic revolution did not end up evenly distributed, but was dominated by particular groups. Any new flow of wealth – such as that generated by the Industrial Revolution, in more modern times, or globalization – will always spark off intense competition for its control; and, if the amount of new wealth is large enough, those who control it will erect entirely new authority structures. In Western Europe, for instance, the Industrial Revolution eventually destroyed the social and political dominance of the landowning class who had run things since the Middle Ages, because the size of the new industrial fortunes made the amount of money you could make from farming even large areas look silly. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Germania's economic revolution triggered a sociopolitical one, and other archaeological finds have illuminated some of the processes involved.

In antiquity, much of the Jutland peninsula was dotted with pools

and extensive peat bogs, now largely dried out by modern land reclamation projects. Recent excavations have shown that, because of their capacity to swallow even very large items, these and similar parts of the North Sea coastal hinterland have long been used by nearby populations as depositories for their sacrificial goods. Individual items - from chariots to gold dishes - datable to a variety of periods have been unearthed. In the Roman period, from the later second to the fourth century AD, a series of weapon sacrifices were made, many of which have emerged from bogs and pools across the area: Vimose, Thorsbjerg, Nydam near Ostersøtrup, and Ejsbøl Mose. Many comprised the arms and equipment of large retinues - even whole armies - which were ritually mutilated as part of the sacrificial act. The most astonishing set of finds of the third century, made at Ejsbøl Mose in southern Jutland, gives us the profile of the force to which the weapons originally belonged. In this excavation archaeologists found the weapons of a small army of two hundred men armed with spears, lances and shields (at least sixty also carried swords and knives); an unknown number of archers (675 arrowheads were excavated) and twelve or fifteen men, nine of them mounted, with more exclusive equipment. This was a highly organized force, with a clear hierarchy and a considerable degree of military specialization: a leader and his retinue, not a bunch of peasant soldiers.<sup>40</sup>

From this we can begin to see how leaders could so distance themselves from their peers as to make their power hereditary. In the Germanic world of the first century, power ebbed and flowed quickly. But if one generation of a family could use its new wealth to recruit an organized military force of the kind found at Ejsbøl Mose, and then pass on both wealth and retainers, its chances of replicating power over several generations were considerably increased. Organized military forces provided the enforcement by which the claims aired in rich burials were asserted in practice. By the fourth century, retinues were a crucial attribute of the powerful. Chnodomarius, the Alamannic leader defeated by Julian at Strasbourg, had a personal retinue of 200 warriors,<sup>41</sup> inviting comparison with the Ejsbøl Mose deposit.

Other sources emphasize that such retinues had plenty of uses outside of battle. The persecution of Christians which the Goth Athanaric launched after partially extracting the Tervingi from Roman domination in 369 generated a document of particular vividness, the *Passion of St Saba*, the story of the persecution and death of the Gothic

martyr of that name. Saba was a 'proper' member of the Tervingi, not the descendant of Roman prisoners. The *Passion* was written on Roman territory, where the saint's body was found after his death. Among the many precious details we are given is that intermediate-level leaders among the Tervingi had their own retinues and used them to enforce their will. It was a pair of heavies sent by a certain Atharid who eventually did Saba to death by drowning.<sup>42</sup>

Retinues also help explain the nature of fourth-century seats of power. They were built and functioned, as we have seen, as centres of consumption (like the Runderberg, or Pietroasa in Romania). From the early medieval texts we learn that generous entertaining was the main virtue required of Germanic leaders in return for loyal service, and there is no reason to suppose this a new phenomenon. It required not only large halls, but also a regular flow of foodstuffs and the means to purchase items such as Roman wine, not produced by the local economy. As the existence of specialist craftworkers also emphasizes, Germania's economy had developed sufficiently beyond its old Jastorf norms to support a far larger number of non-agricultural producers.

The bog deposits make another crucial point. As sacrifices to the gods, they were probably thank offerings for victory: the Ejsbøl Mose deposit celebrates the destruction of the 200 men whose weapons were consigned to its depths. There's no way of knowing exactly who they were. Were they the army of one small Germanic group defeated by that of another? Tacitus offers a revealing commentary on some Chatti and those who defeated them, a group of Hermenduri, in a struggle over salt deposits: 'Both sides, in the event of victory, had vowed their enemies to Mars and Mercury. This vow implied the sacrifice of the entire beaten side with their horses and all their possessions.'<sup>43</sup> The ritual sacrifice of defeated enemies was clearly not new. Just one of these small first-century tribal groupings could have put more than a couple of hundred men in the field, so that the Ejsbøl Mose deposit may celebrate the destruction of a bunch of rootless warriors on the make - possibly defeated while raiding south Jutland for booty, or in order to establish the kind of dominance that would have allowed them to extract tribute and foodstuffs more regularly. Either way, the find shows that while new flows of wealth usually end up being distributed unequally, this never happens without conflict.

Another feature of much of Germania in the Roman period was a marked increase in the number of weapons burials. Military retinues

were not only the result of sociopolitical revolution, but also the vehicle by which it was generated, and large-scale internal violence was probably a feature of the Germanic world from the second to fourth centuries. The hereditary dynasts who dominated the new Alamannic, Frankish and Saxon confederations probably established their power through aggressive competition. The same was true, in a slightly different context, of the Gothic world further east. There, a much larger element of migration was involved, but to create the confederations such as Athanaric's Tervingi, indigenous populations had to be subdued and new hereditary hierarchies established. In both east and west, the growing wealth of the region generated a fierce struggle for control, and allowed the emergence of specialist military forces as the means to win it. The outcome of these processes was the larger political confederation characteristic of Germania in the fourth century.

### *The Beginnings of Feudalism?*

SOME SCHOLARS have concluded that, already in fourth-century Germanic society, it was only a small aristocratic class, well equipped with armed retainers, that mattered. There are, however, many third- and fourth-century burials, apart from the richest, that contain some grave goods: males with weapons and females with quite sophisticated arrays of personal jewellery. These burials are far too numerous to belong just to kings and a feudal nobility. Later, written evidence offers strong hints as to whose they might have been. In the late fifth and early sixth centuries, Germanic successor states to the western Roman Empire produced large numbers of legal texts. These consistently portray Germanic (and Germanic-dominated) societies at this later date as comprising essentially three castes: freemen, freedmen and slaves. Unlike its Roman counterpart, where the offspring of freedmen were completely free – and thus freemen – freedman status in the Germanic world was hereditary. Intermarriage between the three castes was banned, and a complicated public ceremony was required for an individual to jump across any of the divides. This mode of legal categorization is widely found – amongst Goths, Lombards, Franks and Anglo-Saxons, for instance. A relatively large freeman class, rather than a small feudal nobility, is also visible playing important political

and military roles in the Ostrogothic Italian kingdom, and important political, military and landowning roles in the Frankish and Lombard. Freemen were probably also the subjects of the weapons burials of fifth- and sixth-century Anglo-Saxon England, which were clearly used to claim status rather than merely to signal that the individual had been a warrior.<sup>33</sup>

Given that much more wealth had flowed into Germanic society between the fourth and the sixth centuries, as various Germanic groups took over parts of the Roman Empire, I don't believe that political participation could have been any less in the fourth century than in the sixth. If anything, it ought to have been broader. So if a relatively numerous freeman class still existed in the sixth century, it surely did two hundred years before. In other words, a quasi feudal warrior aristocracy did not yet dominate Germania in the late Roman period. And Roman sources, despite their lack of interest in the inner working of Germanic societies, provide just enough evidence to confirm the point. Fourth-century Gothic kings couldn't just issue orders, for instance, but had to sell their policies to a relatively broad audience, and Gothic armies of about AD 400 contained large numbers of elite fighters – freemen, in other words – not just a few warrior aristocrats. These elite fighters had their own fighting dependants; the later law codes state that freedmen (but not slaves) fought, presumably alongside the freemen whose dependants they were.<sup>34</sup> This is not to say that all freemen were equal: some were much richer than others, especially if high in royal favour. But social power was not yet confined to a small nobility.

How kings and nobles, complete with their retinues, interacted with the rest of freeman society is not something that archaeology can shed much light upon. Nor are the Roman sources much help. But, to be able to feed and reward them, every figure with a substantial armed retinue – all the Alamannic kings, and the 'judges' and kings of the Tervingi – must have established some rights to economic support from freemen and their dependants. In fourth-century Germania there is no sign of the bureaucratic literacy necessary for large-scale taxation, but agricultural produce must have been regularly exacted. Again, therefore, the situation had clearly moved on from the first century, when contributions were occasionally made to distinguished chiefs on a voluntary basis (as Tacitus tells us in his *Germania*). Obviously, kings were responsible for representing their subjects in any negotiations

with outside powers – such as the summit meeting between Athanaric and Valens – and for formulating 'foreign policy'. They must also have had the right to require military service of their subjects, as foreign policy often involved little more than deciding whom to make war upon. The job description also included some kind of legal function. At the very least, kings will have judged disputes between their grander subjects. Whether they had the right to make general laws, as opposed to decisions in specific cases, is more doubtful. Law-making in the Germanic kingdoms of the post-Roman west looks like a new function, and, even then, was exercised only in the context of consensus. When a law code was devised, it was at assemblies of the great and the good, and issued in the name of all.<sup>55</sup>

Fourth-century Roman sources shed little light on how precisely kings and their retainers intersected with this freeman caste, but the *Passion of St Saba* does get us a bit closer. The persecution of Christians among the Tervingi was a policy decision of the overall leadership, involving the sub-kings as well as Athanaric himself. Enforcement, however, was largely in the hands of local village communities, retainers unfamiliar with local circumstances being sent round from time to time to check on progress. In the case of Saba's village, this gave the locals every chance to frustrate a policy with which they were clearly out of sympathy. Faced with the order to persecute, they swore false oaths that there weren't any Christians amongst them. This village, at least, clearly wanted to protect its Christians from Athanaric's persecution, and there was nothing his retainers could do about it. They had no idea who might or might not be a Christian; it was because Saba wouldn't go along with the deception that he was martyred.<sup>56</sup>

Germanic society remained, then, a broadly based oligarchy with much power in the hands of a still numerous freeman elite. It had some way to go before it reached the feudal state of the Carolingian era.

### *Rome, Persia and the Germans*

OUR EXPLORATION of the changes that remade the Germanic world between the first and fourth centuries clearly shows why Roman attention remained so firmly fixed on Persia in the late imperial period.

The rise of that state to superpower status had caused the massive third-century crisis, and Persia remained the much more obvious threat, even after the eastern front had stabilized. Germania, by contrast, even in the fourth century, had come nowhere close to generating a common identity amongst its peoples, or unifying its political structures. Highly contingent alliances had given way to stronger groupings, or confederations, the latter representing a major shift from the kaleidoscopic first-century world of changing loyalties. Although royal status could now be inherited, not even the most successful fourth-century Germanic leaders had begun to echo the success of Ardashir in uniting the Near East against Roman power. To judge by the weapons deposits and our written sources, fourth-century Germani remained just as likely to fight each other as the Roman state.

That said, the massive population increase, economic development and political restructuring of the first three centuries AD could not fail to make fourth-century Germania much more of a potential threat to Roman strategic dominance in Europe than its first-century counterpart. It is important to remember, too, that Germanic society had not yet found its equilibrium. The belt of Germanic client kingdoms extended only about a hundred kilometres beyond the Rhine and Danube frontier lines: this left a lot of Germania excluded from the regular campaigning that kept frontier regions reasonably in line. The balance of power on the frontier was, therefore, vulnerable to something much more dangerous than the periodic over-ambition of client kings. One powerful exogenous shock had been delivered by Sasanian Persia in the previous century – did the Germanic world beyond the belt of closely controlled client kingdoms pose a similar threat?

Throughout the Roman imperial period, established Germanic client states periodically found themselves the targets of the predatory groups settled further away from the frontier. The explanation for this is straightforward. While the whole of Germania was undergoing economic revolution, frontier regions were disproportionately affected, their economies stimulated not least by the presence nearby of thousands of Roman soldiers with money to spend. The client states thus tended to become richer than outer Germania, and a target for aggression. The first known case occurred in the mid-first century AD, when a mixed force from the north invaded the client kingdom of one Vannius of the Marcomanni, to seize the vast wealth he had accumulated during his thirty-year reign.<sup>57</sup> And it was peripheral northern

groups in search of client-state wealth who also started the second-century convulsion generally known as the Marcomannic War. The same motivation underlay the arrival of the Goths beside the Black Sea. Before the mid-third century, these lands were dominated by Iranian-speaking Sarmatian groups who profited hugely from the close relations they enjoyed with the Roman state (their wealth manifest in a series of magnificently furnished burials dating from the first to third centuries). The Goths and other Germanic groups moved into the region to seize a share of this wealth.

The danger posed by the developing Germanic world, however, was still only latent, because of its lack of overall unity. In practice, the string of larger Germanic kingdoms and confederations – now stretching all the way from the mouth of the Rhine to the north Black Sea coast – provided a range of junior partners within a dominant late Roman system, rather than a real threat to Rome's imperial power. The Empire did not always get what it wanted in this relationship, and maintaining the system provoked a major confrontation between senior and junior partners about once every generation. Nonetheless, for the most part, the barbarians knew their place: none better than Zizais, the leader who approached the emperor Constantius for assistance in 357:

On seeing the emperor he threw aside his weapons and fell flat on his breast, as if lying lifeless. And since the use of his voice failed him from fear at the very time when he should have made his plea, he excited all the greater compassion; but after several attempts, interrupted by sobbing, he was able to set forth only a little of what he tried to ask.<sup>58</sup>

An inability, at first, to speak, then a little quiet sobbing and the stuttering out of a few requests, did the trick. Constantius made Zizais a Roman client king and granted him and his people imperial protection. Woe betide the barbarian who forgot the script.

The later Roman Empire was doing a pretty good job of keeping the barbarians in check. It had had to dig deep to respond to the Persian challenge, but it was still substantially in control of its European frontiers. It has long been traditional to argue, however, that extracting the extra resources needed to maintain this control placed too many strains on the system; that the effort involved was unsustainable. Stability did return to Rome's eastern and European frontiers in

the fourth century, but at too high a price, with the result that the Empire was destined to fall – or so the argument goes. Before exploring the later fourth and fifth centuries, it is important to examine the Empire of the mid-fourth more closely. Was it a structure predestined to collapse?



## THE LIMITS OF EMPIRE

IN AD 373 OR THEREABOUTS, the commander of Roman military forces in North Africa (in Latin, *comes Africae*), one Romanus by name, was cashiered for provoking some of the Berber tribes settled on the fringes of the province to rebel. Theodosius, the field marshal (*magister militum*) sent to deal with the emergency, found amongst Romanus' papers a highly incriminating document. It was a letter to the commander from a third party, which included the following greeting from a certain Palladius, until recently a senior imperial bureaucrat: 'Palladius salutes you and says that he was dismissed from office for no other reason than that in the case of the people of Tripolis he spoke to the sacred ears [of the Emperor Valentinian I] what was not true.' On the strength of this, Palladius was dragged out of retirement from his country estates and frogmarched back to Trier. Lying to the emperor was treason. Rather than face interrogation, which in such cases routinely involved torture, Palladius committed suicide en route. The full story slowly emerged.

The trail led back to 363, when Romanus had first been appointed. The countryside around the town of Lepcis Magna in the province of Tripolitania had just been looted by Berber tribesmen from the neighbouring desert hinterland, and its inhabitants wanted Romanus to retaliate. He duly gathered his forces at Lepcis, but demanded logistic support to the tune of 4,000 camels, which the citizens refused to provide. Romanus thereupon dispersed his soldiers, and no campaign was mounted. The outraged citizens used their next annual provincial assembly, probably that of 364, to send an embassy of complaint to the emperor Valentinian. Romanus tried to head things off at the pass, getting his version of the story to Valentinian first via a relative called Remigius who was currently *magister officiorum* (something like the head of the Civil Service, one of the top bureaucrats of the western Empire). Valentinian refused to believe either version at first telling, and ordered a commission of inquiry. But it was slow to

get moving, and in the meantime further Berber attacks prompted the townsfolk of Lepcis to send a second embassy to complain about Romanus' continued inactivity. Hearing of yet more attacks, Valentinian lost his temper, and this is where Palladius enters the story. He was chosen to conduct a fact-finding mission, and was also given the job of taking with him gifts of cash for the African troops.<sup>2</sup>

Following the emperor's orders, Palladius travelled to Lepcis and discovered for himself the truth about what Romanus had – or rather, had not – been up to. At the same time, however, Palladius was doing deals with the commanders and paymasters of African army units, which allowed him to keep for himself some of the imperial cash in his care. Everything was set up for a meeting of minds. Palladius threatened Romanus with a damning indictment of his inactivity, while Romanus brought up the small matter of Palladius' embezzlement. In a devil's bargain, Palladius kept the cash, and, back in Trier, told Valentinian that the inhabitants of Lepcis had nothing to complain of. The emperor, believing his time had been wasted, unleashed the full apparatus of the law on the plaintiffs of Lepcis. Palladius was sent to Africa a second time, to preside over the trials. With so much at stake for the judge, there could be only one outcome for the defendants. So a few witnesses were bribed, and agreed that there had never been any attacks; the loose ends were neatly sewn up, probably in 368, and one governor and three ambassadors were executed for making false statements to the emperor. There the matter rested until Palladius' letter to Romanus came to light six years later. Two surviving ambassadors, who'd had the sense to go into hiding when sentenced to have their tongues cut out, then re-emerged from the woodwork to have their say. The affair duly claimed its final victims: Palladius, of course, and Romanus, not to mention the *magister officiorum* Remigius, and the false witnesses.

At first sight, there might seem nothing out of the ordinary here: negligence, embezzlement and a particularly nasty cover-up. What else would you expect of an imperial structure caught in a declining trajectory towards extinction? Ever since Gibbon, the corruption of public life has been part of the story of Roman imperial collapse. But while the fourth-century Empire had its fair share of corruption, it is important not to jump to conclusions. In sources of the time you can easily find examples of every kind of wrongdoing imaginable: from military commanders who artificially inflate manpower returns while

keeping their units under strength so as to pocket the extra pay, to bureaucrats shuffling money around between different accounts until it becomes 'lost' in the paper trail and they can divert it to their own purposes.' But whether any of this played a substantial role in the collapse of the western Empire is much more doubtful.

Uncomfortable as the idea might be, power has, throughout history, had a long and distinguished association with money making: in states both big and small, both seemingly healthy and on their last legs. In most past societies and many present ones, the link between power and profit was not even remotely problematic, profit for oneself and one's friends being seen as the whole, and perfectly legitimate, point of making the effort to get power in the first place. When our old friend the philosopher Themistius started to attract the attention of the emperor Constantius in the early 350s, Libanius, a friend who taught rhetoric and was a great believer in the moral values of a classical education, wrote to him: 'Your presence at [the emperor's] table denotes a greater intimacy ... anyone you mention is immediately better off, and ... his pleasure in granting such favours exceeds yours in receiving them.' For Libanius, Themistius' new-found influence was not a problem: quite the reverse. In fact, the whole system of appointments to bureaucratic office within the Empire worked on personal recommendation. Since there were no competitive examinations, patronage and connection played a critical role. In more than one speech to different emperors, Themistius dwelt on the topic of 'friends', an emperor's immediate circle who were responsible for bringing to his attention the names of suitable appointees for office. Certainly, Themistius wanted these friends to have powers of discernment, so that they would make first-class recommendations; but he had no desire to change things in any structural way. Nepotism was systemic, office was generally accepted as an opportunity for feathering one's nest, and a moderate degree of peculation more or less expected.

And this was nothing new. The early Roman Empire, even during its vigorous conquest period, was as much marked as were later eras by officials (friends of higher officials) misusing – or perhaps one should just say 'using' – power to profit themselves and their associates. According to the historian Sallust, writing in the mid-first century BC, Roman public life had been stripped of its moral fibre with the destruction of Carthage, its last major rival, in 146 BC. In fact, though, the great magnates of public life had always been preoccupied with

self-advancement, and the early Empire had been no different. Much of what we might term 'corruption' in the Roman system merely reflects the normal relationship between power and profit. Some emperors, like Valentinian I, periodically made political capital out of cracking down on 'corruption', but even Valentinian made no attempt to change the system.' To my mind, it is important to be realistic about the way human beings use political power, and not to attach too much importance to particular instances of corruption. Since the power-profit factor had not impeded the rise of the Empire in the first place, there is no reason to suppose that it contributed fundamentally to its collapse. In the Lepcis scandal, Romanus, Palladius and Remigius overstepped the mark. Looked at more closely, Lepcisgate offers us something much more than a good cover-up.

### The Limits of Government

IN THEORY, the emperor was the supreme authority when it came to issuing general legislation, and in individual cases he had the right to modify the law, or break it, as he chose. He could condemn to death, or pardon, with a single word. To all appearances, he was an absolute monarch. But appearances can be deceptive.

Valentinian, a long-time soldier before his accession, had first-hand experience of supervising the Rhine frontier; based at Trier, he was close enough to investigate promptly any untoward incident. But a problem arising in Africa was a very different matter. The first Valentinian knew of the Lepcis episode was the sudden arrival at his court of two diametrically opposed accounts of it, one brought by the first legation from the provincial assembly, the other from Romanus via the *magister officiorum*, Remigius. Trier placed Valentinian about 2,000 kilometres away from the scene of the action. As he couldn't leave the Rhine frontier to investigate one relatively minor incident in a rather obscure corner of North Africa, all he could do was send a representative to sort out the facts for him. If that person fed him misinformation, as was the case here, and ensured that no alternative account reached the imperial ears, the emperor was bound to act accordingly. The essential point that emerges from Lepcisgate is that, for all an emperor's power, in both theory and practice, Roman central government could only make effective decisions when it received

accurate information from the localities. The regime of Valentinian liked to style itself as the protector of the taxpayer from the unfair demands of the military. But, thanks to Palladius' false report, the emperor's actions in the case of Lepcis Magna had entirely the opposite effect.

A leap of imagination is required to grasp the difficulty of gathering accurate information in the Roman world. As ruler of just half of it, Valentinian was controlling an area significantly larger than the current European Union. Effective central action is difficult enough today on such a geographical scale, but the communication problems that Valentinian faced made it almost inconceivably harder for him than for his counterparts in modern Brussels. The problem was twofold: not only the slowness of ancient communications, but also the minimal number of lines of contact. The Lepcis problem was exacerbated not only by the snail's pace of such communications as there were, but also by the sheer paucity of points of contact: two in the first instance (the ambassadors, plus Remigius representing Romanus' view), supplemented by a third when Valentinian sent his fact-finding mission in the person of Palladius. Once Palladius verified Romanus' view, that was two against one, and Valentinian had no additional sources of information. In the world of the telephone, the fax and the internet, the truth is much harder to hide. Beyond the immediate vicinity of his base on the Rhine frontier, Valentinian's contacts with the city communities that made up his Empire were sparse and infrequent.

Insight into the problem is provided by another extraordinary survival from the later Roman Empire: papyrus documents preserved through the centuries by the dry heat of the Egyptian desert. (As fate would have it, most of the archive ended up in the John Rylands Library in Manchester, a city famous for its rainfall.) These particular papyri, purchased by the great Victorian collector A. S. Hunt in 1896, come from Hermopolis on the west bank of the Nile at the boundary between Upper and Lower Egypt. One key letter got separated from the rest, ending up in Strasbourg. When identified as part of the same collection, it became clear that these were the papers of a certain Theophanes, a landowner from Hermopolis and a fairly high-level Roman bureaucrat of the early fourth century. In the late 310s he was legal adviser to Vitalis who, as *rationalis Aegypti*, was the finance officer in charge of the arms factories and other operations of the Roman state in the province. The bulk of the archive refers to a journey

Theophanes made from Egypt to Antioch (modern Antakya in southern Turkey, close to the Syrian border), a regional capital of the Roman east, on official business, sometime between 317 and 323. The papers don't provide a narrative of the journey – we can only guess what the aim of the mission may have been – but something in its own way more valuable: packing lists, financial accounts and dated itineraries which, between them, bring Roman official travel vividly to life.<sup>6</sup>

Being on official business, Theophanes was able to use the same public transport system that carried Symmachus to Trier, the *cursus publicus*, which comprised neatly spaced way-stations combining stables – where official travellers could obtain a change of animals – and (sometimes) travel lodges. The most immediately striking documents are those dealing with Theophanes' itineraries: daily listings of the distances he managed to cover. Having begun the journey to Antioch on 6 April at the town of Nikiu in Upper Egypt, he eventually rolled into the city three and a half weeks later on 2 May. His daily average had been about 40 kilometres: on the first part of the journey, through the Sinai desert, he made only about 24 kilometres a day, but speeded up to about 65 once he hit the Fertile Crescent. And on a breakneck final day into Antioch, scenting the finishing line, his party covered over a hundred. The return journey took a similar time. Bearing in mind that Theophanes' official status allowed him to change horses whenever necessary – so there was no need to conserve equine energy – this gives us a benchmark for the bureaucratic operations of the Roman Empire. We know that in emergencies, galloping messengers, with many changes of horse, might manage as much as 250 kilometres a day. But Theophanes' average on that journey of three and a half weeks was the norm: in other words, about 40, the speed of the oxcart. This was true of military as well as civilian operations, since all the army's heavy equipment and baggage moved by this means too.

The other striking feature of Theophanes' journey is its complexity. As might be expected, given such rates of travel, only the top echelons of the Roman bureaucracy tended to travel outside their immediate province – hence, lower-level officials wouldn't know their counterparts, even in adjacent regions. Egypt, for most purposes, ran itself, so Theophanes didn't usually need to know people in Antioch, and neither, for that matter, did he know people anywhere else en route. Vitalis armed him, accordingly, with letters of introduction to everyone

who mattered on the way, some of which he didn't use (which is how they come to survive in the archive). Given contemporary rules of etiquette, you had to think ahead and take with you a range of appropriate offerings: courtesy demanded that an exchange of gifts – sometimes valuable ones – inaugurate any new relationship. The accounts record items destined for such a fate, such as *lungurion* (coagulated lynx musk), an ingredient of expensive perfumes.<sup>7</sup> Large amounts of cash also had to be carried, probably supplemented in Theophanes' case by letters of authorization allowing him, as an official traveller, to draw funds from official sources. Hence such travellers would often need protection, hiring armed escorts where necessary. Theophanes' accounts record food and drink bought for soldiers who accompanied them during the desert legs of the journey in Egypt.

The packing lists also make highly illuminating reading. Theophanes obviously needed a variety of attires: lighter and heavier clothing for variations in weather and conditions, his official uniform for the office, and a robe for the baths. The travel lodges of the *cursus publicus* were clearly very basic. The traveller brought along his own bedding – not just sheets, but even a mattress – and a complete kitchen to see to the food situation. As this suggests, Theophanes did not travel alone. We don't know how many went with him, but he was clearly accompanied by a party of slaves who dealt with all the household tasks. He generally spent on their daily sustenance just under half of what he spent on his own. This battered bundle of papyrus documents at Manchester is full of such gems of detail. Just before leaving civilization to cross the desert again, the party bought 160 litres of wine for the home journey. This cost less than the two litres of a much rarer vintage that Theophanes had with his lunch on the same day. At another point, the accounts record the purchase of snow, used to cool the wine for dinner. What emerges is an arresting vision of the complex and cumbersome nature of official travel.

In reality, then, places were much further away from one another in the fourth century than they are now. As I sit here writing, it's about 4,000 kilometres from Hadrian's Wall to the Euphrates, and so it was in Theophanes' day. But at Theophanes' rate of progress – even giving him a higher average daily rate of 50 kilometres (not counting the days spent crossing the desert) – a journey that overland would now take a maximum of two weeks would in the fourth century have

taken something close to three months. Looking at the map with modern eyes, we perceive the Roman Empire as impressive enough; looked at in fourth-century terms, it is staggering. Furthermore, measuring it in the real currency of how long it took human beings to cover the distances involved, you could say it was five times larger than it appears on the map. To put it another way, running the Roman Empire with the communications then available was akin to running, in the modern day, an entity somewhere between five and ten times the size of the European Union. With places this far apart, and this far away from his capital, it is hardly surprising that an emperor would have few lines of contact with most of the localities that made up his Empire.

Moreover, even if his agents had somehow maintained a continuous flow of intelligence from every town of the Empire into the imperial centre, there is little that he could have done with it anyway. All this putative information would have had to remain on bits of papyrus, and headquarters would soon have been buried under a mountain of paperwork. Finding any particular piece of information when required would have been virtually impossible, especially since Roman archivists seem to have filed only by year.<sup>8</sup> Primitive communication links combined with an absence of sophisticated means of processing information explain the bureaucratic limitations within which Roman emperors of all eras had to make and enforce executive decisions.

The main consequence of all this was that the state was unable to interfere systematically in the day-to-day running of its constituent communities. Not surprisingly, the range of business handled by Roman government was only a fraction of that of a modern state. Even if there had been ideologies to encourage it, Roman government lacked the bureaucratic capacity to handle broad-reaching social agendas, such as a health service or a social security budget. Pro-active governmental involvement was necessarily restricted to a much narrower range of operation: maintaining an effective army, and running the tax system. And, even in the matter of taxation, the state bureaucracy's role was limited to allocating overall sums to the cities of the Empire and monitoring the transfer of monies. The difficult work – the allocation of individual tax bills and the actual collection of money – was handled at the local level. Even here, so long as the agreed tax-take flowed out of the cities and into the central coffers,

local communities were left – as the municipal laws we examined in Chapter 1 imply – to be autonomous, largely self-governing communities.<sup>9</sup> Keep Roman central government happy, and life could often be lived as the locals wanted.

This is a key to understanding much of the internal history of the Roman Empire. Lepcisgate illustrates not so much a particular problem of the later Empire, but the fundamental limitations affecting Roman central government of all eras. To comprehend the operation of government fully, the logistic impossibility of day-to-day interference from the centre must be considered alongside the imperial centre's absolute legal power and unchallenged ideological domination. It was the interaction of these two phenomena that created the distinctive dynamic of the Roman Empire's internal functioning. Given that it was administratively impossible for central government to control everything, anything to which it *did* add its stamp of authority carried an overwhelming legitimacy, if put to the test. What tended to happen, therefore, was that individuals and communities would invoke the authority of the centre for their own purposes. At first sight, this could suggest that the imperial finger was constantly being stuck into a whole host of local pies, but such an impression is misleading. Outside of taxation, emperors interfered in local affairs only when locals – or at least a faction of local opinion – saw an advantage to themselves in mobilizing imperial authority.

We have already seen this pattern at work in the early imperial period. As the Spanish inscriptions (pp. 38–9) show us, Roman-style towns existed right across the Empire as a consequence of local communities adopting municipal laws drawn up at the centre. In particular, the richer local landowners had quickly appreciated that securing a constitution with Latin rights was a path to Roman citizenship, which would qualify them to participate in the highly lucrative structures of Empire. The story had its shadier side, of course. A grant of Italian status was so valuable to the leaders of the community involved that they were willing to do whatever it took to win the privilege, often by courting patrons at the centre who would put in a good word for them with the emperor of the day. This kind of relationship between centre and locality was the bedrock on which the Empire was built.<sup>10</sup>

This relationship also applied to individuals who used the 'rescript' system. Rescripts allowed you to consult the emperor – in practice, his legal experts – on a matter of legal detail. Using the top half of a piece

of papyrus, anyone could write to the emperor about an issue on which he wanted a decision. The emperor would then reply on the bottom half. You couldn't use the system to get him to settle an entire case – only to raise a technical point of law that might dictate its outcome. Again, we're indebted to a unique papyrus survival for an indication of how extensively the system was used. In the spring of AD 200, the emperors Severus and Caracalla were installed in the city of Alexandria in Egypt. A papyrus, now to be found at Columbia University, records that the emperors answered five rescripts (the replies were posted publicly) on 14 March, four on 15 March, and another four on the 20th.<sup>11</sup> So even if we allow emperors lots of annual holidays, at least a thousand people a year could cite an imperial opinion in their private legal disputes.

Equally important, once a rescript had been sent back to the provinces, the emperor lost control over it, so a piece of paper carrying his name and his authority was on the loose. Hardly surprising, then, that these imperial replies were used in all kinds of unintended ways. The fifth-century *Theodosian Code* (see pp. 124–5) cites a number of scams: cases where the imperial answer had been physically detached from the original question and then used to answer another, others where letters extracted for one case had been applied to another, and still others where letters had been extracted under false pretences.<sup>12</sup> Roman lawyers were as inventive as their modern counterparts, and subject to much less control. Not only does the rescript system show us an imperial authority that was essentially reactive, but abuses of it also make clear that distance could allow the suitor to make unintended use of the potent weapon represented by a legal ruling with the emperor's name on it.

In addition to the rescript system, emperors were also deluged with requests of a more general kind, which they might or might not respond to positively. They could either launch their own inevitably slow investigation, or accept the petitioner's inherently biased version of the truth. This usually meant the deployment of imperial power to more or less random effect: the emperor chose either to believe or not to believe the petitioner, and acted accordingly. The impact this had on day-to-day affairs depended upon the lengths that citizens in local communities would go to in order to exploit that power.

Any picture of Roman government, then, has to bear in mind that, for all their legal and ideological authority, emperors' control was



limited. All the same, such was their monopoly of authority that their approval was constantly being solicited by the citizenry. Consequently, the imperial centre was both powerful and strictly constrained.

IN THE MIDDLE years of the third century, this inherently limited governmental machine was suddenly forced to confront an entirely new range of problems, all traceable to the rise of Sasanian Persia. As we have seen, the immediate problem was solved by the military, fiscal and political restructuring of the Empire. It has long been customary to argue, however, that, while rescuing the Empire from these difficulties, the changes it put in place doomed it to decline and collapse in the longer term. After Diocletian, according to this view, the Roman agricultural economy was substantially overtaxed. Peasants were forced to surrender so much of their produce that some of them died from starvation. The new tax levels, it is argued, also ruined the landowning classes who had built and run the towns of the Empire since its formation. In fact, the whole imperial edifice came to be dominated by constraint rather than consent, symbolized in a repressive, bureaucratic machine staffed, as one influential view put it, by many 'idle mouths', a further burden on the taxpayer. On the military side, the enlarged army may have done its job in the short term; but manpower shortages within the Empire forced fourth-century emperors to draw increasingly on 'barbarian' recruits from across the frontier. As a result, the Roman army declined in both loyalty and efficiency. All in all, this line of argument goes, while the initial Persian crisis was overcome, it had required such an effort that the financial, political and even military strength of the Empire was visibly draining away.<sup>13</sup>

These views remain deeply entrenched. The present generation of scholarship has demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt, however, that such a stance greatly underestimates the economic, political and ideological vitality of the late Roman world.

### *The Price of Survival*

ANCIENT AGRICULTURE suffered from two limitations. First, before the invention of tractors, the productivity of any piece of land was hugely dependent on how much labour was available to work it. Second, ancient farmers, while employing their own sophisticated techniques

for maintaining fertility, were unable greatly to increase their output of foodstuffs in anything like the way that the use of chemical fertilizers has made possible in the modern era. This in turn acted as a brake on population levels, since human numbers tend to increase up to a limit imposed by the availability of food. In addition, transport was hugely expensive; Diocletian's Prices Edict (see p. 65) records that a wagon of wheat doubled in price for every fifty miles it travelled. In these fundamental ways, the Roman economy was at every era trapped at not much above subsistence levels. Until very recently, scholars have been confident that the higher tax-take of the late Roman state aggravated these conditions to the extent that it became impossible for the Empire's peasant population to maintain itself even at existing low levels.

The evidence comes mostly from written sources. To start with, the annual volume of inscriptions known from Roman antiquity declined suddenly in the mid-third century to something like one-fifth of previous levels. Since chances of survival remained pretty constant, this massive fall-off was naturally taken as an indicator that landowners, the social group generally responsible for commissioning these largely private inscriptions, had suddenly found themselves short of funds. A study of the chronology also led the heavier tax burden imposed by the late Roman state to be seen as the primary cause, since the decline coincided with the tax hikes that were necessary to fight off the increased Persian threat. Such views were reinforced by other sources documenting another well known fourth-century phenomenon, commonly known as the 'flight of the curials'. Curials (or decurions) were the landowners of sufficient wealth to get a seat on their town councils (Latin, *curiae*). They were the descendants of the men who had built the Roman towns, bought into classical ideologies of self-government, learned Latin, and generally benefited from Latin rights and Roman citizenship in the early imperial period. In the fourth century, these descendants became increasingly unwilling to serve on the town councils their ancestors had established. Some of the sources preserve complaints about the costs involved in being a councillor, others about the administrative burden imposed upon the curials by the Roman state. It has long been part of the orthodoxy of Roman collapse, therefore, that the old landowning classes of the Empire were overburdened into oblivion.<sup>14</sup>

Other fourth-century legal texts refer to a previously unknown

phenomenon, the 'deserted lands' (*agri deserti*). Most of these texts are very general, giving no indication of the amounts of land that might be involved, but one law, of AD 422, referring to North Africa, indicates that a staggering 3,000 square miles fell into this category in that region alone. A further run of late Roman legislation also attempted to tie certain categories of tenant farmers (*coloni*) to their existing estates, to prevent them moving. It was easy, in fact irresistible, to weave these separate phenomena into a narrative of cause and effect, whereby the late Empire's punitive tax regime made it uneconomic to farm all the land that had previously been under cultivation. This was said to have generated large-scale abandonment – hence the *agri deserti* – as well as governmental intervention to try to prevent this very abandoning of the lands that the new tax burden had made uneconomic. Stripped of a larger portion of their production, the peasantry could not maintain their numbers over the generations, which further lowered output.<sup>15</sup>

Into this happy consensus a large bomb was lobbed, towards the end of the 1950s, by a French archaeologist named Georges Tchalenko. As with many revolutionary moments, it took a long time for bystanders to realize that they had witnessed something earth-shattering, but this bomb set off a chain of detonations. Tchalenko had spent much of the 1940s and 1950s roaming the limestone hills in what is now a fairly obscure (and relatively peaceful) corner of the Middle East. In antiquity, these hills belonged to the rural hinterland of one of the great imperial capitals, Antioch: Antakya in modern Turkey. (The hills, by a quirk of fate, have ended up over the border in northern Syria.) In his explorations, Tchalenko came across the remains of a dense spread of villages, sturdily constructed from limestone blocks, which had been abandoned in the eighth to ninth centuries after the Arab conquest of the region.

The villages showed that these hills had once been the home of a flourishing rural population, which could afford not only to build excellent houses, but to endow their villages with sizeable public buildings. This ancient population was much denser than anything the region has supported at any point since, and it clearly made its living from agriculture; Tchalenko believed it produced olive oil commercially. The really revolutionary bit was Tchalenko's discovery that prosperity first hit the region in the later third and early fourth centuries, then continued into the fifth, sixth and seventh with no sign

of decline. At the very moment when the generally accepted model suggested that the late Roman state was taxing the lifeblood out of its farmers, here was hard evidence of a farming region prospering.<sup>16</sup>

Further archaeological work, using field surveys, has made it possible to test levels of rural settlement and agricultural activity across a wide geographical spread and at different points in the Roman period. Broadly speaking, these surveys have confirmed that Tchalenko's Syrian villages were a far from unique example of late Roman rural prosperity. The central provinces of Roman North Africa (in particular Numidia, Byzacena and Proconsularis) saw a similar intensification of rural settlement and production at this time. This has been illuminated by separate surveys in Tunisia and southern Libya, where prosperity did not even begin to fall away until the fifth century. Surveys in Greece have produced a comparable picture. And elsewhere in the Near East, the fourth and fifth centuries have emerged as a period of *maximum* rural development – not minimum, as the orthodoxy would have led us to expect. Investigations in the Negev Desert region of modern Israel have shown that farming also flourished in this deeply marginal environment under the fourth-century Empire. The pattern is broadly similar in Spain and southern Gaul, while recent re-evaluations of rural settlement in Roman Britain have suggested that its fourth-century population reached levels that would only be seen again in the fourteenth. Argument continues as to what figure to put on this maximum, but that late Roman Britain was remarkably densely populated by ancient and medieval standards is now a given.<sup>17</sup> The only areas, in fact, where, in the fourth century, prosperity was not at or close to its maximum for the entire Roman period were Italy and some of the northern European provinces, particularly Gallia Belgica and Germania Inferior on the Rhine frontier. Even here, though, estimates of settlement density have been revised substantially upwards in recent years.

For the poverty of the latter two northern provinces, the explanation probably lies in third-century disruption. The Rhine frontier region was being heavily raided at the same time as so much energy was being poured into solving the Persian problem, and it may be that rural affluence in parts of the region never recovered. A methodological problem may also provide at least part of the explanation. Roman-period surveys rely on datable finds of commercially produced pottery to identify and date settlements. If a population ceased to import these

wares, reverting to undatable locally made ceramics, especially if at the same time they were also building more in wood than in the traditional Roman stone, brick and tile – which surveys also find – then they would have become archaeologically invisible. This was happening in several areas of northern Europe by at least the mid-fifth century, so it is far from impossible that the seeming lack of fourth-century inhabitants in parts of the northern Rhine frontier region was caused not by substantial population decline, but by the first appearance of these new habits. The jury is still out.

The case of Italy is rather different. As befitted the heartland of a conquest state, Italy was thriving in the early imperial period. Not only did the spoils of conquest flood its territories, but its manufacturers of pottery, wine and other goods sold them throughout the western provinces and dominated the market. Also, Italian agricultural production was untaxed. As the economies of the conquered provinces developed, however, this early domination was curtailed by the development of rival enterprises closer to the centres of consumption and with much lower transport costs. By the fourth century, the process had pretty much run its course; and from Diocletian onwards, Italian agriculture had to pay the same taxes as the rest of the Empire. So the peninsula's economy was bound to have suffered relative decline in the fourth century, and it is not surprising to find more marginal lands there being taken out of production. But as we have seen, the relative decline of Italy and perhaps also of north-eastern Gaul was more than compensated for by economic success elsewhere. Despite the heavier tax burden, the late Roman countryside was generally booming.<sup>18</sup> The revolutionary nature of these findings cannot be overstated.

Looked at with this in mind, the literary evidence is far from incompatible with the archaeology. The laws forcing labour to stay in one place, for example, would only have been enforceable where rural population levels were relatively high. Otherwise, the general demand for labour would have seen landowners competing with one another for peasants, and being willing to take in each other's runaways and protect them from the law. More generally, the term 'deserted lands' (*agri deserti*) was coined in the fourth century to describe lands from which no tax was being collected. It carries no necessary implication that land so labelled had ever previously been cultivated, and certainly the large tract of North African territory referred to in the law of 422

consisted mostly of desert and semi-desert hinterland where normal agriculture had always been impossible. Nor is the late Empire's more demanding tax regime incompatible with a buzzing agricultural economy. Tenant subsistence farmers tend to produce only what they need: enough to provide for themselves and their dependants and to pay any essential additional dues such as rent. Within this context there will often be a certain amount of economic 'slack', consisting of extra foodstuffs they could produce but which they choose not to because they can neither store them, nor, thanks to high transport costs, sell them. In this kind of world, taxation – if not imposed at too high a level – can actually increase production: the tax imposed by the state is another due that has to be satisfied, and farmers do sufficient extra work to produce the additional output. Only if taxes are set so high that peasants starve, or the long-term fertility of their lands is impaired, will such dues have a damaging economic effect.

None of this means that it was fun to be a late Roman peasant. The state imposed heavier demands on him than it had on his ancestors, and he was prevented by law from moving around in search of the best tenancy terms. But there is nothing in the archaeological or written evidence to gainsay the general picture of a late Roman countryside at or near maximum levels of population, production and output.<sup>19</sup>

There is, however, no doubt that most cities of the Empire appear to have suffered in one respect. The decline in inscriptions from the mid-third century reflects a fall in the number of new public buildings being commissioned. The only cities that continued to see public building on a large scale were the central and regional capitals of the Roman state. And even here, instead of local grandees endowing their towns with another memorial toilet block (or some such structure) in their own memory, buildings were being erected by state officials using state funds.<sup>20</sup> The private funding of public building in one's hometown belonged to the very early imperial period, when this constituted the prime route to self-promotion. Putting up the right kinds of public building was part of persuading some high official to recommend your hometown to the emperor for the grant of a Roman constitution. Once your town had Latin rights, then financing buildings became a strategy for winning power and influence within it. The towns of the Empire quickly built up endowments of publicly owned land (often from wills), and also acquired the right to levy local taxes

and tolls, in itself a substantial annual income whose expenditure was controlled by the town council and particularly by its leading magistrates. Magistrates were voted into office by a town's free citizens. Competitive local building in this context was all about winning elections and hence controlling the use of local funds.<sup>21</sup>

The confiscation by the state of local endowments and taxes in the third century removed most of the fun from local government. By the fourth, there was little point in spending freely to win power in your hometown, if all you then got to do was run errands for central government. By this time, retired members of the expanding class of imperial bureaucrats (*honorati*) were being given all the interesting and prestigious tasks in local government, including the detailed allocation of their town's tax burden. Nothing would be more guaranteed to generate invitations to dinner and other small marks of attention than the knowledge that, when the time came, you were going to be in charge of setting the new tax bills. *Honorati* also got to sit with the provincial governor when he was trying legal cases, and helped him arrive at verdicts. As the many surviving letters to local *honorati* make clear, this was another moment when great influence could be brought to bear, and again, it tended to make the *honoratus* very popular in local society. What happened in the late Empire, in other words, was a major shift in local political power away from town councils to imperial bureaucrats. This did away with the whole point of the local displays of generosity recorded in the early imperial inscriptions.

The stock image of the late Roman bureaucracy also needs revising. Much of its characterization as an oppressive alien force of 'idle mouths' sucking the vitality out of local society can be traced back to a speech of the rhetor Libanius, which catalogued the dubious social origins of some of the leading bureaucrats and senators of mid-fourth-century Constantinople. Three Praetorian Prefects (chief civilian executive officers) of the 350s and early 360s – Domitianus, Helpidius and Taurus – had fathers, Libanius tells us, who personally engaged in manual labour; the father of a fourth, Philippus, made sausages, and the governor of the province of Asia, Dulcitius, was the son of a fuller.<sup>22</sup> The image conjured up of a bureaucracy dominated by new men from nowhere is very powerful, but in this speech Libanius had a very particular axe to grind. The Senate of Constantinople had just refused membership to one of his protégés, a certain Thalassius, on the grounds that Thalassius' father was a 'tradesman'

(he had owned an arms factory). As a vast body of other evidence makes clear (including endless letters of reference written by Libanius himself), however, the vast majority of the new bureaucrats and senators of the fourth-century Empire were actually drawn from the curial classes, not from further down the social scale. The language of this bureaucracy was the 'correct' Latin and Greek espoused by the traditional educational curriculum. This tells us instantly that its members had benefited from a lengthy and expensive private education. The bureaucracy of the late Roman period did not consist of outsiders or parvenus, then, but of town councillors who had renegotiated their position within the changing structures of Empire. Only a small hard-headed inner elite – called *principales* in Latin – stayed on the councils in order to monopolize the few interesting jobs left.

Because bureaucratic positions were so attractive, emperors were flooded with requests for appointments. Many of these were granted. Emperors always liked to raise their popularity ratings by appearing generous, and these kinds of grants seemed, individually, pretty harmless. Despite the laws attempting to regulate bureaucratic expansion by forcing ex-town councillors back to their cities, by AD 400 large numbers of wealthy landowners were making the central imperial bureaucracy the main focus of their careers. At this date, the eastern financial office (the *largitionales*) had a staff of 224 officers, and a waiting list of 610 ready to take their places when they finished their stint. And, because of the delay involved in getting a post under these conditions, parents were appending their children's names to waiting lists at birth. Thus, far from showing the power of a newly oppressive central state, the rise of the imperial bureaucracy demonstrates the continuation of the same kind of political relationship between centre and locality that we have already observed. Here again, as in the rescript system and in the whole process of Romanization itself, the state certainly started the ball rolling by setting up a new rule book, as it were. But the process was taken over by locals responding to the rule changes and adapting them to their own interests.

Understanding bureaucratic expansion in this way makes it impossible to see the 'flight of the curials' as fundamentally an economic phenomenon, or, at least, as reflecting a decline in the private fortunes of the landowning class. It also takes much of the sting out of the argument that the bureaucracy were so many 'idle mouths'. It is hard to suppose that these bureaucrats' ancestors, as local landowners sitting

on town councils, had been any less 'idle' – if one chooses to see them this way. They had always been essentially a rentier class, overseeing the labour of their peasants rather than engaging in the primary work of agricultural production. But whereas before they had been 'idling' on their town councils, now they were idling in the offices of the central Roman state. Their salaries, paid by the state, were also very low. Bureaucratic expansion needed little extra taxation to fund.<sup>23</sup> What made the jobs attractive, as we have seen, was the status that accompanied them and the chance to charge fees to those who needed your services.

While these changes in upper-class career patterns certainly had some economic effects, there is nothing to suggest that upper-class life changed in any fundamental way. Written sources and archaeological excavation both confirm that the late Roman landowning elite, like their forebears, would alternate between their urban houses and their country estates. Fourth-century Antioch, for instance, boasted the hugely wealthy suburb of Daphne, and extensive investigations at the city of Sardis in modern Turkey have uncovered numerous wealthy private houses of the fourth and fifth centuries. There is no reason to suppose, therefore, that luxury urban trades, which depended on landowners coming to 'town' from time to time to spend their wealth, will have suffered very much. What may have happened is that the reorientation away from town councils to an imperial bureaucracy meant that larger landowners maintained houses in regional and provincial imperial capitals rather than in their hometowns. This would have increased the tendency – already noticed in patterns of public spending – for capitals to prosper at the expense of lesser towns.<sup>24</sup>

What the new evidence and the consequent reinterpretations of the old evidence have demonstrated, then, is that although, in order to meet the strategic challenge posed by Persia, the state was taking a bigger share of agricultural output in tax and had confiscated local city funds, agriculture itself, the main engine of the economy, was not in crisis, nor was the fate of the landowning classes as bleak as traditionally supposed. The 'flight of the curials' was an adjustment, if a major one, in the location of political power. Old arguments that fifth-century political collapse was the result of fourth-century economic crisis cannot, therefore, be sustained.

There is also more than enough here to prompt a rethink about claims that, from the mid-third century, the army was so short of

Roman manpower that it jeopardized its efficiency by drawing ever increasingly on 'barbarians'. There is no doubt that the restructured Roman army did recruit such men in two main ways. First, self-contained contingents were recruited on a short-term basis for particular campaigns, returning home once they were over. Second, many individuals from across the frontier entered the Roman army and took up soldiering as a career, serving for a working lifetime in regular Roman units. Neither phenomenon was new. The auxiliary forces, both cavalry and infantry (*alae* and *cohortes*), of the early imperial army had always been composed of non-citizens, and amounted to something like 50 per cent of the military. It is impossible to know much about recruiting patterns among the rank and file, but nothing about the officer corps of the late Empire suggests that barbarian numbers had increased across the army as a whole. The main difference between early and late armies lay not in their numbers, but in the fact that barbarian recruits now sometimes served in the same units as citizens, rather than being segregated into auxiliary forces. Training in the fourth century remained pretty much as fierce as ever, producing bonded groups ready to obey orders. From Ammianus Marcellinus' picture of the army in action we find no evidence that its standards of discipline had fallen in any substantial way, or that the barbarians in its ranks were less inclined to obey orders or any more likely to make common cause with the enemy. He records one incident in which a recently retired barbarian let slip some important intelligence about Roman army dispositions, but none showed disloyalty in combat. There is no sign, in short, that the restructuring of the Empire had important knock-on effects in the military sphere.<sup>25</sup> It is entirely possible, nonetheless, that the extra costs incurred in the running of the fourth-century Empire could have alienated the loyalty of the provincial populations that had bought into the values of Romanness with such vigour under the early Empire.

### Christianity and Consent

WITH THE EMPEROR Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312, the old ideological structures of the Roman world also began to be dismantled, and for Edward Gibbon this was a key moment in the story of Roman collapse:



The clergy successfully preached the doctrines of patience and pusillanimity; the active virtues of society were discouraged; and the last remains of the military spirit were buried in the cloister; a large portion of public and private wealth was consecrated to the specious demands of charity and devotion; and the soldiers' pay was lavished on the useless multitudes of both sexes, who could only plead the merits of abstinence and chastity. Faith, zeal, curiosity, and the more earthly passions of malice and ambition, kindled the flame of theological discord; the church, and even the state, were distracted by religious factions, whose conflicts were sometimes bloody, and always implacable; the attention of emperors was diverted from camps to synods; the Roman world was oppressed by a new species of tyranny; and the persecuted sects became the secret enemies of their country.<sup>26</sup>

Others have not been so strident. But the notion that Christianity broke up ideological unity and hindered the ability of the state effectively to win support has since been shared by others; so too the fear that the Church diverted financial and human resources from vital material ends. The issues of both taxation and the rise of Christianity thus raise the more general question of whether it was against a backdrop of local discontent that the reconstructed imperial authority struggled to maintain its legitimacy.

Fourth-century sources make occasional complaints about tax rates. There was also one major tax riot. In Antioch in 387, a crowd gathered to protest about the imposition of a supertax. The mood got ugly, and imperial statues were toppled. Imperial images, like everything else to do with emperors, were sacred, and assaults on them an act of treason. The local community was terrified that army units might be turned loose on the city in punishment, but the reigning emperor, Theodosius I, took a conciliatory line to resolve the crisis. And this is a fair enough indicator of the general climate.<sup>27</sup> Tax collection goes more smoothly, and rates can be increased more easily, if taxpayers understand and broadly accept the reasons for which they are being taxed. Fourth-century emperors perfectly understood the principle of consent, and never lost an opportunity to stress that taxation paid above all for the army – which was true – and that the army was necessary to defend Roman society from outside threats. Most of the ceremonial occasions of the imperial year involved a keynote speech lasting about an hour whose purpose was to celebrate the regime's recent successes. Hardly

any of our surviving late imperial examples fail to make some reference to the army and its function of protector of the Roman world.

Different emperors sold their frontier policies in different ways, but there was no disagreement on this basic purpose of taxation. The population was daily reminded of the point on its coinage: one of the most common designs featured an enemy grovelling at the emperor's feet. On the down side, military failings might be criticized for wasting the taxpayers' contributions. In one famous incident, Ursulus, chief financial minister of the emperor Constantius II, complained sarcastically and publicly about the performance of the army on a visit to the ruins of Amida, shortly after the Persians sacked it in 359: 'Look at the courage with which the cities are defended by our soldiers, for whose huge salary bills the wealth of the Empire is already barely sufficient.' The generals didn't forget this. When Constantius died, part of the price paid by his successor for their support was the condemnation to death of Ursulus in the political trials that marked the change of regime. For the most part, however, the system worked tolerably well; the Antioch tax riot is an isolated example, which was caused, notice, not by the usual taxes but by an additional imposition. While, of course, many landowners sought to minimize their tax bills – the laws and letter collections are full of uncovered scams and requests for dispensations to this effect – fourth-century emperors did manage to sell to their population the idea that taxation was essential to civilized life, and generally collected the funds without ripping their society apart.<sup>28</sup>

On the religious front Constantine's conversion to Christianity certainly unleashed a cultural revolution. Physically, town landscapes were transformed as the practice of keeping the dead separate from the living, traditional in Graeco-Roman paganism, came to an end, and cemeteries sprang up within town walls. Churches replaced temples; as a consequence, from the 390s onwards there was so much cheap second-hand marble available that the new marble trade all but collapsed. The Church, as Gibbon claimed, attracted large donations both from the state and from individuals. Constantine himself started the process, the *Book of the Popes* lovingly recording his gifts of land to the churches of Rome, and, over time, churches throughout the Empire acquired substantial assets. Furthermore, Christianity was in some senses a democratizing and equalizing force. It insisted that everybody, no matter what his economic or social status, had a soul

and an equal stake in the cosmic drama of salvation, and some Gospel stories even suggested that worldly wealth was a barrier to salvation. All this ran contrary to the aristocratic values of Graeco-Roman culture, with its claim that true civilization could only be attained by the man with enough wealth and leisure to afford many years of private education and active participation in municipal affairs. Take also, for instance, the grammarians' traditional use of the veil. In antiquity, a veil marked the entrance to higher places, as in the monumental audience halls where the imperial presence was normally veiled from the main body of the court. St Augustine dismissed with contempt in his *Confessions* the grammarians' use of veils to cover the entrances to their schools. For him and other late Roman Christians, the practice came to be dismissed as a false claim to wisdom.

Instead, fourth-century Christian intellectuals set up in their writings a deliberately non-classical anti-hero, the uneducated Christian Holy Man, who, despite not having passed through the hands of the grammarian, and despite characteristically abandoning the town for the desert, achieved heights of wisdom and virtue that went far beyond anything that could be learned from Homer or Vergil, or even from participating in self-government. The Holy Man was the best-case product of the monastery – as Gibbon pointed out, Christian monasticism attracted a substantial number of recruits at this time. The monastic lifestyle was extravagantly praised by highly educated Christians, who saw in its strictures a level of devotion equivalent to that of the Christian martyrs of old. Nor does it take much sifting through the sources to find examples of high-status Christians rejecting participation in the normal practices of Roman upper-class life. In Italy, around the turn of the fifth century, within a few years of one another, the moderately wealthy Paulinus of Nola and a staggeringly wealthy senatorial heiress, Melania the younger, both liquidated their fortunes and embraced lives of Christian devotion. Paulinus became a bishop, devoting himself to the cult of the martyr Felix, while Melania took herself off to the Holy Land. Thus Christianity asked awkward questions of, and forced some substantial revisions in, many of the attitudes and practices that Romans had long taken for granted.<sup>29</sup>

But while the rise of Christianity was certainly a cultural revolution, Gibbon and others are much less convincing in claiming that the new religion had a seriously deleterious effect upon the functioning of

the Empire. Christian institutions did, as Gibbon asserts, acquire large financial endowments. On the other hand, the non-Christian religious institutions that they replaced had also been wealthy, and their wealth was being progressively confiscated at the same time as Christianity waxed strong. It is unclear whether endowing Christianity involved an overall transfer of assets from secular to religious coffers. Likewise, while some manpower was certainly lost to the cloister, this was no more than a few thousand individuals at most, hardly a significant figure in a world that was maintaining, even increasing, population levels. Similarly, the number of upper-class individuals who renounced their wealth and lifestyles for a life of Christian devotion pales into insignificance beside the 6,000 or so who by AD 400 were actively participating in the state as top bureaucrats. In legislation passed in the 390s, all of these people were required to be Christian. For every Paulinus of Pella, there were many more newly Christianized Roman landowners happy to hold major state office, and no sign of any crisis of conscience among them.

Nor was there any pressing reason why Christianity should have generated such a crisis, since religion and Empire rapidly reached an ideological rapprochement. Roman imperialism had claimed, since the time of Augustus, that the presiding divinities had destined Rome to conquer and civilize the world. The gods had supported the Empire in a mission to bring the whole of humankind to the best achievable state, and had intervened directly to choose and inspire Roman emperors. After Constantine's public adoption of Christianity, the long-standing claims about the relation of the state to the deity were quickly, and surprisingly easily, reworked. The presiding divinity was recast as the Christian God, and the highest possible state for humankind was declared to be Christian conversion and salvation. Literary education and the focus on self-government were shifted for a while to the back burner, but by no means thrown out. And that was the sum total of the adjustment required. The claim that the Empire was God's vehicle, enacting His will in the world, changed little: only the nomenclature was different. Likewise, while emperors could no longer be deified, their divine status was retained in Christian-Roman propaganda's portrayal of God as hand-picking individual emperors to rule with Him, and partly in His place, over the human sphere of His cosmos. Thus, the emperor and everything about him, from his bedchamber to his treasury, could continue to be styled as 'sacred'.<sup>30</sup>

These were not claims asserted merely by a few loyalists in and around the imperial court. On Christmas Day 438, a new compendium of recent Roman law, the *Theodosian Code* (*Codex Theodosianus*), was presented to the assembled senators in the old imperial capital. All senatorial meetings were fully minuted and the minutes passed on to the emperor. Not surprisingly, these records have not survived; the piles of verbiage would not have made wildly exciting reading for medieval or even late Roman copyists. The minutes of the *Theodosian Code* meeting were, however, incorporated into the Preface to official copies of the *Code* made after 443. A single eleventh-century manuscript deriving from one such official copy is preserved in the Ambrosian Library at Milan. Such is the slender thread by which this unique text survived.<sup>31</sup> The Praetorian Prefect of Italy, Glabrio Faustus, who presided, and in whose palatial home the senators had gathered, opened the meeting by formally introducing the text to the assembly. After reminding his audience of the original edict that had established the law commission, he presented the *Code* to them. In response, the assembled senators let rip at the tops of their voices:

'Augustuses of Augustuses, the greatest of Augustuses!'<sup>32</sup> (repeated 8 times)

'God gave You to us! God save You for us!' (27 times)

'As Roman Emperors, pious and felicitous, may You rule for many years!' (22 times)

'For the good of the human race, for the good of the Senate, for the good of the State, for the good of all!' (24 times)

'Our hope is in You, You are our salvation!' (26 times)

'May it please our Augustuses to live forever!' (22 times)

'May You pacify the world and triumph here in person!' (24 times)

The repetition of these acclamations seems extraordinary to us, but the message conveyed by this ceremony is worth careful consideration. Its most obvious message was Unity. The great and good of the Roman world were speaking with one voice in praise of their imperial rulers in the city that was still its symbolic capital. Only slightly less obvious, when you stop to think about it, is the second message: the confidence of the senators in the Perfection of the Social Order of which they and their emperors were symbiotic parts. You can't have complete Unity without an equally complete sense of Perfection. The normal state of human beings is disunity. The only things that people

can be of one mind about are those that are self-evidently the best. And, as the opening acclamations make clear, the source of that Perfection was, straightforwardly, God, the Christian deity. By 438, the Senate of Rome was a thoroughly Christian body. At the top end of Roman society, the adoption of Christianity thus made no difference to the age-old contention that the Empire was God's vehicle in the world.

The same message was proclaimed at similar ceremonial moments all the way down the social scale, even within Church circles. Town council meetings always began with similar acclamations, as did formal gatherings of an entire urban populus to greet an emperor, an imperial official or even a new imperial image. (When a new emperor was elected, images of him were distributed to the cities of the Empire.) At all of these moments – and there were many in a calendar year – the same key idea predominated.<sup>33</sup> Many Christian bishops, as well as secular commentators, were happy to restate the old claim of Roman imperialism in its new clothing. Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea was already arguing, as early as the reign of Constantine, that it was no accident that Christ had been incarnated during the lifetime of Augustus, the first Roman emperor. Despite the earlier history of persecutions, went his argument, this showed that Christianity and the Empire were destined for each other, with God making Rome all-powerful so that, through it, all mankind might eventually be saved.

This ideological vision implied, of course, that the emperor, as God's chosen representative on earth, should wield great religious authority within Christianity. As early as the 310s, within a year of the declaration of his new Christian allegiance, bishops from North Africa appealed to Constantine to settle a dispute that was raging among them. This established a pattern for the rest of the century: emperors were now intimately involved in both the settlement of Church disputes and the much more mundane business of the new religion's administration. To settle disputes, emperors called councils, giving bishops the right to use the privileged travel system, the *cursus publicus*, in order to attend. Even more impressively, emperors helped set the agendas to be discussed, their officials orchestrated the proceedings, and state machinery was used to enforce the decisions reached. More generally, they made religious law for the Church – Book 16 of the *Theodosian Code* is entirely concerned with such matters – and influenced appointments to top ecclesiastical positions.

The Christian Church hierarchy also came to mirror the Empire's administrative and social structures. Episcopal dioceses reflected the boundaries of city territories (some even preserve them to this day, long after they have lost all other meaning). Further up the scale, the bishops of provincial capitals were turned into metropolitan archbishops, enjoying powers of intervention in the new, subordinate sees. Under Constantine's Christian successors, the previously obscure Bishop of Constantinople was elevated into a Patriarch on a par with the Bishop of Rome – because Constantinople was the 'new Rome'. Very quickly, too, local Christian communities lost the power to elect their own bishops. From the 370s onwards, bishops were increasingly drawn from the landowning classes, and controlled episcopal successions by discussions among themselves. With the Church now so much a part of the state – bishops had even been given administrative roles within it, such as running small-claims courts – to become a Christian bishop was not to drop out of public life but to find a new avenue into it. If the Christianization of Roman society is a massively important topic, an equally important, and somewhat less studied one, is the Romanization of Christianity. The adoption of the new religion was no one-way street, but a process of mutual adaptation that reinforced the ideological claims of emperor and state.<sup>34</sup>

None of this is to say, of course, that the Christianization of the Empire was achieved without conflict, or that Christianity and the Empire were perfectly suited to one another. Like Paulinus of Nola and Melania, some bishops and other Christian intellectuals, not to mention Holy Men, explicitly or implicitly rejected the claim that the Empire represented a perfect, God-sustained civilization. But rejection of the Empire was little more than an undertone among fourth-century Christian thinkers. The fourth century was also a crucial moment in the formation of Christian doctrine, a process that generated many inner Christian conflicts into which a succession of emperors was drawn to one side or the other. Conflict over doctrine was for the most part confined, however, to the bishops. There were a few moments when it spilled over into large-scale rioting, but it was never widespread or sustained enough to suggest that Christians' capacity to disagree with one another caused any serious damage to the functioning of the Empire.<sup>35</sup>

What the rise of Christianity really demonstrates, like the creation of the newly enlarged bureaucracy, is that the imperial centre had lost

none of its capacity to draw local elites into line. As much recent writing on Christianization has emphasized, religious revolution was achieved more by trickle-down effect than by outright confrontation. Until the end of the fourth century, seventy years after Constantine first declared his new religious allegiance, the perception that emperors might show more favour to Christians in promotions to office was what spread the new religion among the Roman upper classes. All Christian emperors faced intense lobbying from the bishops, and all made highly Christian noises from time to time. Also, from an early date they banned blood sacrifices, which were particular anathema to Christians. Other pagan cult practices were allowed, though, and there was no imperial mechanism to enforce Christianity at the local level. This meant that, as in everything except taxation, the preference of the citizens decided what actually happened on the ground. Where the bulk of critical opinion was, or became, Christian, pagan temples were closed and sometimes dismantled. Where it remained true to the old cults, religious life continued much as before, and Christian emperors were happy enough to allow the variety. It was only when a critical mass of important local decision-makers had already become Christian towards the end of the century, after three generations of imperial sponsorship, that emperors could safely enact more aggressively Christianizing measures.<sup>36</sup>

The imperial centre thus retained enough ideological force and practical power of patronage for a more or less uninterrupted run of Christian rulers over three or four generations to bring local opinion largely into line with the new ideology (Julian the Apostate ruled the whole Empire as a pagan for less than two years). To my mind, a similar dynamic was at work here as in the earlier process of Romanization. The state was unable simply to force its ideology on local elites, but if it was consistent in making conformity a condition for advancement, then landowners would respond. As the fourth century progressed, 'Christian and Roman' – rather than 'villa and town dwelling' – were increasingly the prerequisites of success, and the movers and shakers of Roman society, both local and central, gradually adapted themselves to the new reality. As with the expansion of the bureaucracy, the imperial centre had successfully deployed new mechanisms for keeping the energies and attentions of the landowning classes focused upon itself.

Taxes were paid, elites participated in public life, and the new

religion was effectively enough subsumed into the structures of the late Empire. Far from being the harbingers of disaster, both Christianization and bureaucratic expansion show the imperial centre still able to exert a powerful pull on the allegiances and habits of the provinces. That pull had to be persuasive rather than coercive, but so it had always been. Renegotiated, the same kinds of bonds continued to hold centre and locality together.

### The Roman Polity

THE FIRST IMPRESSION given by Roman state ceremonies such as the one held to introduce the *Theodosian Code* to the Roman Senate is one of overwhelming power. A state machine that could make an assemblage of its richest landowners engage in such a spectacle of synchronized acclamation is not to be trifled with. But there are other aspects of the *Theodosian Code* ceremony, as well as the law-book's reception, that give us a rather different insight – this time, into the political limitations, which, for all its continued strength, lay at the heart of the Roman imperial system.

After their rousing introduction, the assembled Roman fathers get down to the nitty-gritty:

'We give thanks for this regulation of Yours!' (repeated 23 times)

'You have removed the ambiguities of the imperial constitutions!'<sup>37</sup>  
(23 times)

'Pious emperors thus wisely plan!' (26 times)

'You wisely provide for lawsuits. You provide for the public peace!'  
(25 times)

'Let many copies of the Code be made to be kept in the governmental offices!' (10 times)

'Let them be kept under seal in the public bureaux!' (20 times)

'In order that the established laws may not be falsified, let many copies be made!' (25 times)

'In order that the established laws may not be falsified, let all copies be written out in letters!'<sup>38</sup> (18 times)

'To this copy which will be made by the constitutionaries, let no annotations upon the law be added!' (12 times)

'We request that copies to be kept in the imperial bureaux shall be made at public expense!' (16 times)

'We ask that no laws be promulgated in reply to supplications!'  
(21 times)

'All the rights of landowners are thrown into confusion by such surreptitious actions!' (17 times)

A ceremony introducing a new compendium of law was a highly meaningful moment for the Roman state. We've already seen the role that education and self-government played in the traditional Roman self-image. For Roman society as a whole, written law possessed a similarly loaded significance. Again in the Romans' own view of things, its existence made Roman society the best of all possible means of ordering humanity. Above all, written law freed men from the fear of arbitrary action on the part of the powerful (the Latin word for freedom – *libertas* – carried the technical meaning 'freedom under the law'). Legal disputes were treated on their merits; the powerful could not override the rest. And Christianization merely strengthened the ideological importance ascribed to written law. For whereas Christian intellectuals could criticize as elitist the moral education offered by the grammarian, and hold up the uneducated Holy Man from the desert as an alternative figure of virtue, the law was not open to the same kind of criticism. It protected everyone in their designated social positions. It also had a unifying cultural resonance, since God's law, whether in the form of Moses and the Ten Commandments or Christ as the new life-giving law, was central to Judaeo-Christian tradition. In ideological terms, therefore, it became easy to portray all-encompassing written Roman law – as opposed to elite literary culture – as the key ingredient of the newly Christian Empire's claim to uphold a divinely ordained social order.<sup>39</sup>

Reading between the lines, however, the *Theodosian Code*, in both ceremony and content, can also take us to the heart of the political limitations within the late Roman system. One such limitation is implicit in the original Latin text of the acclamations, but hidden in the English translation, English being unable to distinguish between the singular and the plural 'you'. The acclamations were all addressed to both the emperor Theodosius II, ruler of the east, and his younger first cousin Valentinian III, ruler of the west. Both were members of the Theodosian dynasty, and the original issuing of the *Code* in the east in 437 was carefully timed to coincide with a marriage alliance between the two branches, Valentinian marrying Theodosius' daughter Eudoxia.



Marriage and law code together highlighted unity in the Roman world, with eastern and western emperors functioning in perfect harmony. As its name implies, though, all the hard work behind the *Theodosian Code* had actually been done in Constantinople, by commissioners appointed by Theodosius.<sup>40</sup> And the fact that Theodosius was the dominant partner here underscores a fundamental problem in the structure of power within the late Empire. For the administrative and political reasons discussed in Chapter 1, the imperial office had to be divided. Harmony between co-rulers was possible if one was so predominant as to be unchallengeable. The relationship between Theodosius and Valentinian worked happily enough on this basis, as had that between Constantine and various of his sons between the 310s and the 330s. But to function properly, the Empire required more or less equal helmsmen. A sustained inferiority was likely to be based on an unequal distribution of the key assets – financial and military – and if one was too obviously subordinate, the politically important factions in his realm were likely to encourage him to redress the balance – or, worse, encourage a usurper. This pattern had, for example, marred Constantius II's attempts to share power with Gallus and Julian in the 350s.

Equal emperors functioning together harmoniously was extremely difficult to achieve, and happened only rarely. For a decade after 364, the brothers Valentinian I and Valens managed it, and so did Diocletian, first with one other emperor from 286, then with three from 293 to 305 (Diocletian's so-called Tetrarchy). But none of these partnerships produced lasting stability, and even power-sharing between brothers was no guarantee of success. When they succeeded to the throne, the sons of Constantine I proceeded to compete among themselves, to the point that Constantine II died invading the territory of his younger brother Constans. Diocletian's Tetrarchy, likewise, worked well enough during his political lifetime, but broke down after his abdication in 305 into nearly twenty years of dispute and civil war, which was ended only by Constantine's defeat of Licinius in 324.

In fact, the organization of central power posed an insoluble dilemma in the late Roman period. It was an administrative and political necessity to divide that power: if you didn't, usurpation, and often civil war, followed. Dividing it in such a way as not to generate war between rivals was, however, extremely difficult. And even if you solved the problem for one generation, it was pretty much impossible to pass on that harmony to your heirs, who would lack the habits of

trust and respect that infused the original arrangement. Consequently, in each generation the division of power was improvised, even where the throne was passed on by dynastic succession. There was no 'system', and whether power was divided or not, periodic civil war was inescapable. This, it must be stressed, wasn't just a product of the personal failings of individual emperors – although the paranoia of Constantius II, for example, certainly contributed to the excitement. Essentially, it reflected the fact that there were so many political concerns to be accommodated, such a large spread of interested landowners within the much more inclusive late Empire, that stability was much harder to achieve than in the old Roman conquest state, when it had been only the Senate of Rome playing imperial politics.

In many ways, then, periodic conflict at the top was the price to be paid for the Empire's success in integrating elites across its vast domain. This is much better viewed, though, as a limitation than as a basic flaw: the Empire was not fundamentally undermined by it. It was a systemic fact of life that imparted something of a rhythm to imperial politics. Periods of political stability were likely to be punctuated by moments of conflict before a new regime, effectively recombining a sufficiently wide range of interests, managed to establish itself. Sometimes the conflict was brief, sometimes extended, as in the fall-out from the Tetrarchy, when it took two decades to narrow succession down to the line of Constantine. But the civil wars of the fourth century did not make the Empire vulnerable, for instance, to Persian conquest. Indeed, the propensity at that time to divide imperial authority achieved a better outcome than the refusal to do so had in the mid-third, when twenty legitimate emperors and a host of usurpers each averaged just two years in power.

A second major political limitation of the Roman world emerges from a closer look at the Senate's ceremonial greeting to the *Theodosian Code*. Even if the irregularity in the number of repetitions suggests that the senators' enthusiasm may have run away with them at times, the specificity of the comments relating to the *Code* itself indicates that the individual acclamations were carefully scripted. The closest modern analogy for such a prescriptive line in public ceremonial is provided by the proceedings of the old annual congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in its pre-1989 days. Amongst other things, these involved stage-managed, mutually congratulatory, applause at the end of the Party Secretary's address. The audience roared its approval, and

then the speaker stood up to applaud back: presumably congratulating the audience on its good sense in recognizing the terrific value of whatever he had just said. In the case of the *Theodosian Code*, the Roman Senate ran to a more ambitious script, but the underlying message was the same. Both were highly public celebrations of a proclaimed ideological unity, based on a claim to a perfection grounded in the structures – here, particularly the legal ones – of the state. Public life in the Roman Empire, I would argue, is best understood as working like that of a one-party state, in which loyalty to the system was drilled into you from birth and reinforced with regular opportunities to demonstrate it. A couple of important differences, however, are worth underlining. Unlike the Soviet state, which lasted only about seventy years and faced powerful ideological competition, totalitarian and non-totalitarian, the Roman state lasted for half a millennium and operated for the most part entirely unchallenged. The resonance of Roman superiority imbued every facet of public life throughout an individual's lifetime.

As with any one-party system, though, this one had its limitations too. Free speech, for instance, was to some extent restricted. Given that everyone was fully committed to the ideology of Unity in Perfection, it was only on the level of personality (rather than policy) that disagreement could be allowed.<sup>41</sup> Its unchallenged ideological monopoly made the Empire enormously successful at extracting conformity from its subjects, but it was hardly a process engaged in voluntarily. The spread of Roman culture and the adoption of Roman citizenship in its conquered lands resulted from the fact that the Empire was the only avenue open to individuals of ambition. You had to play by its rules, and acquire its citizenship, if you were to get anywhere.

The one-party state analogy points us to two further drawbacks of the system. First, active political participation was very narrowly based. To participate in the workings of the Roman Empire, you had to belong to the wealthier landholding classes. It's impossible to put an exact figure on this group, but its defining features are clear enough. In the early Empire, it required meeting the property qualification for membership of your town council by owning enough land in one city territory and being able to afford to educate your children with a grammarian. This required a substantial income. St Augustine, before he was a saint, belonged to a minor gentry landowning family

from the small town of Thagaste in North Africa. His family had no problem affording the grammarian's fees, but he had an enforced gap year while his father got enough money together for him to be able to finish off his higher education with a rhetor in Carthage, so that his family's level of wealth provides us with a good indicator of the cut-off point.<sup>42</sup>

In the later Empire, political and civic participation could be expressed in a wider variety of ways than had been available earlier. Some local landowners still dominated the few worthwhile positions on their city councils, many more joined the central imperial bureaucracy, and still others, the lesser gentry, were happy to serve in its provincial offices. The latter were called *cohortales*, and some, according to inscriptions from the city of Aphrodisias, were even wealthy enough to act as city benefactors. The late Empire also had a more developed legal system. Since the early third century, Roman law had applied to every inhabitant of the Empire, and there were usually plenty of openings for trained lawyers. These again came from the old curial classes, young hopefuls moving on from the grammarian to study law as part of their higher education. By the third quarter of the fourth century, as Christianity spread and attracted imperial patronage, the landowning classes likewise began to move, as we have seen, into the Church and soon came to dominate the episcopate. The first grammarian-trained bishops I know of are Ambrose in the west and the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa) in the east, all ordained in about 370.<sup>43</sup> This opening-up of a wider range of professions did not bring with it any significant changes in the amount of wealth required. All these professions still needed a traditional grounding with a grammarian.

The politically active landowning class probably amounted, therefore, to less than 5 per cent of the population. To this we might add another percentage or so for a semi-educated professional class, found particularly in the towns. Especially in imperial capitals, a somewhat broader group, by belonging to circus factions and taking part in vociferous demonstrations in the theatre – a means of expressing discontent with particular officials – were able to voice their opinion. They could also exercise an occasional veto by rioting, if they were really upset, but this kind of action never amounted to more than a rather blunt weapon against particular individuals or policies.<sup>44</sup>

THE VAST MAJORITY of the population – whether free, tied or slave – worked the land, however, and were more or less excluded from political participation. For these groups, the state existed largely in the form of tax-collectors making unwelcome demands upon their limited resources. Again, it is impossible to estimate precisely, but the peasantry cannot have mustered less than 85 per cent of the population. So we have to reckon with a world in which over four-fifths had little or no stake in the political systems that governed them. Indifference may well have been the peasants' overriding attitude towards the imperial establishment. Across most of the Empire, habitation and population levels increased in the course of its history, as we have noted, and it is hard not to see this as an effect of the Pax Romana – the conditions of greater peace and stability that the Empire generated. On the other hand, patchy and sporadic peasant resistance, often to do with tax issues, certainly occurred, but manifested itself only in the form of a low-level, if endemic, banditry. Some areas did throw up the occasional bout of more sustained trouble. Isauria, the Cilician upland region of what is now south-western Turkey, was famous for its bandits, and one lot – the Maratacupreni – achieved particular fame in northern Syria by marauding the land in the guise of imperial tax-collectors and helping themselves to people's possessions. That they were plausible gives some idea of what it could feel like to be taxed by the Roman state, but they eventually attracted too much official attention and were wiped out to a man (and woman, and child). The exclusion from – or only very partial inclusion in – the benefits of the Roman system that the majority of the population experienced was one of its core limitations, then, but nothing new. The Empire had always been run for the benefit of an elite. And while this made for an exploited peasantry and a certain level of largely unfocused opposition, there is no sign in the fourth century that the situation had worsened.<sup>45</sup>

The second, rather less obvious, drawback was potentially more significant, given the peasantry's underlying inability to organize itself for sustained resistance. To understand it, we need to consider for a moment the lifestyles of the Roman rich. As we have seen, they spent some of their time on matters of state, whether as local councillors or collecting tax, as relatively senior bureaucratic functionaries (*cohortales* or *palatini*), or as semi-retired imperial bureaucrats. But these activities occupied only a limited amount of their time. By the year 400, the average length of service in many of the central departments of state

had declined to no more than ten years: hardly a lifetime, even when life expectancy was considerably lower than today. What they did the rest of the time, and what provided the underlying focus of their lives, emerges clearly, once again, from the correspondence of Symmachus. He belonged, of course, to the super-rich, so that the scale of his other activities is unrepresentative. The nature of these activities, though, is entirely typical.

There were other forms of wealth in the Roman world apart from landowning; money could be made from trade and manufacture, the law, influence-peddling and so on. But landowning was the supreme expression of wealth, and, as in pre-industrial England, those who made money elsewhere were quick to invest it in estates – because, above all, land was the only honourable form of wealth for a gentleman. This was as much practical as the product of snobbery. Land was an extremely secure investment, and in return for the original outlay estates offered a steady income in the form of annual agricultural production. In the absence of stock markets, and given the limited and more precarious investment opportunities offered by trade and manufacture, land was the gilt-edged stock of the ancient world (and indeed of all worlds, pretty much, prior to the Industrial Revolution). This dictated many of the concerns of upper-class Roman life.

First and foremost, landowners needed to keep the output of their estates up to scratch. A piece of land was in itself only a potential source of revenue; it needed to be worked, and worked efficiently, to produce a good annual income. The right crops had to be grown, for a start. Then, investment of time, effort and capital always offered the possibility of what in pre-Industrial England was termed 'improvement': a dramatic increase in production. Roman landowners spent much of their lives checking on the running of their estates, either directly or through agents. The first five letters of the Symmachus collection were written, for instance, while he was on an extended tour of his central and southern Italian holdings in 375, looking to maximize his income. As he wrote to his father, 'Our estates which are in disorder require to be looked into in all their particulars... In fact, it has now become customary to provide for a countryside which used to be a provider.' Later letters continue to refer periodically to revenue problems, and, in the case of someone as rich as Symmachus, distance added extra ones. Estates in Sicily and North Africa were

always more problematic than those closer to home.<sup>46</sup> It was more efficient, likewise, to work one large rather than two small tracts, so that the canny landowner was always on the lookout for opportunities either to buy suitable extra land, or arrange mutually advantageous swaps. Again, Symmachus' letters in particular, but late Roman sources in general, show that much time and effort went into buying and selling suitable plots.<sup>47</sup>

There was also a host of legal problems. As in Dickens's England, wills were often disputed. Since land, unlike other forms of wealth, was not easily divisible into still profitable portions, parents often faced the choice of either handing over shares in the income of an intact estate, or of favouring one heir over the others by giving him the whole estate. Either way, things could get nasty, or complicated, especially when the heirs with shares came in turn to decide what to do with their stakes after their deaths. Much effort had to go into wills and codicils so as to define the exact solution that the testator was after, and to make sure that it couldn't be challenged. Not surprisingly, Symmachus followed changes in inheritance law closely, and wills are frequently mentioned in his letters.<sup>48</sup> Roman landowners played all the usual tricks. For instance, Symmachus' father transferred to him ownership of one estate on the River Tibur early, to avoid the creditors who might gather after his death.<sup>49</sup> Marriage was in this context much more than the romantic coupling of individuals in love. It involved the establishment of a new household requiring its own economic base. A suitable match had to be found, and a settlement made, with both parties usually contributing to the new couple's financial well-being. One letter refers to a certain Fulvius, 'for a long time of an age to marry', who had been lucky enough to nab the sister of a certain Pompeianus: 'she is not from a less good family than him, and has perhaps the greater wealth'.<sup>50</sup>

Marriage settlements, likewise, offered lawyers the opportunity to make fat fees. Symmachus' own marriage brought him property from his father-in-law's patrimony, which, because it had been transferred, was not confiscated by the state when the latter was prosecuted for fraud.<sup>51</sup> Further legal problems were thrown up by the tax system. One of the things that patrons were often approached for was a reduction in tax bills. There are no known examples of landowners even with excellent connections, being let off tax entirely, but many won reductions. All reductions were, however, precarious in that if

your patron lost power, then the benefits that accrued to you might also be lost. There was thus huge scope for landowners to quarrel with the staff of the Praetorian Prefect's office about what tax reductions might apply and for how long, and what liabilities had already been met. And despite all the care taken with wills and marriage settlements, the fall of a patron could lead to quarrels about rights of ownership. Symmachus' correspondence, not least his official letters as Urban Prefect of Rome, provide plentiful instances of this kind of dispute.<sup>52</sup>

But if being a landowner involved a host of responsibilities, it had its pleasures too. Burdensome though owning lots of houses might be administratively, as long as one had the income, there were endless opportunities for remodelling and redecorating. One letter from Symmachus to his father rattles on about the new marble revetments for his house – so cunningly done that you would have thought them made from a single piece. He was also very proud of some columns that looked like expensive Bithynian marble but had cost him virtually nothing. And on it goes. A new bath-house for his Sicilian estate is mentioned in many letters, and many others refer to odd bits of work being done here and there throughout his lifetime. One letter complains about the builders taking for ever in his house on the Tibur.<sup>53</sup> Some things never change.

After your house or houses had been made suitably comfortable and adorned with the latest fashions (not least, in fourth-century Britain, the installation of colour mosaics), there was all the pleasure of actually living in them. Symmachus particularly loved his villa at Baiae on the Bay of Naples, in many of his letters extolling the beauties of the scenery and food (especially in the autumn). In 396 he spent a particularly pleasant few months between April and December at one after another of his properties at Formia, Cumae, Pozzuoli, Baiae, Naples and Capri. Some of these are still favoured celebrity getaways. He and his wife also had a home on the Tibur just downriver from Rome, which they lived in when Symmachus needed to be in town on business. A favourite pastime of the Roman landed gentry, as of their peers at so many times and places, was hunting, for which a little place just on the edge of the hills or close to a forest was just the thing.<sup>54</sup> Thus, strategically located properties could offer the landowner all the pleasures of the different seasons.<sup>55</sup>

Your country house – or houses – also provided the backdrop for

the other joys of upper-class life. Symmachus often extols the pleasures of working on ancient Latin texts in the seclusion of one or other of his retreats. In one letter, he declares, he has been much too busy with his studies to write; and he also sometimes wrote to friends for copies of works he couldn't find, while describing what he had been up to.<sup>54</sup> Sometimes we find him with good friends staying at their own retreats close by – less often, the friends staying with him – which permitted frequent exchanges of epistolary compliments, not to mention picnics and dinner parties.<sup>57</sup> The health of friends and relatives was a frequent topic, one minor illness requiring multiple missives of inquiry within the space of twenty-four hours. From his daughter, who was clearly a little delicate, he demanded at one point daily bulletins about her health, recommending in return various dietary cures.<sup>58</sup>

The lifestyle of Symmachus and his friends provides a blueprint for that of the European gentry and nobility over much of the next sixteen hundred years. Leisured, cultured and landed: some extremely rich, some with just enough to get by in the expected manner, and everyone perfectly well aware of who was who. And all engaged in an intricate, elegant dance around the hope and expectation of the great wealth that marriage settlement and inheritance would bring. Symmachus and his friends may have enjoyed editing Latin texts rather than painting watercolours and learning Italian, and their notions of such things as childhood and gender may have been rather different, but there is certainly a touch of Jane Austen in togas about the late Roman upper crust.

A FURTHER LIMITATION imposed by the Roman imperial system stems from this elegant, leisured and highly privileged lifestyle. It rested upon the massively unequal distribution of landed property: as noted earlier, less than 5 per cent of the population owned over 80 per cent, and perhaps substantially more. And at the heart of this inequality was the Roman state itself, in that its laws both defined and protected the ownership rights of the property-owning class to whose upper echelons Symmachus belonged. Its land registration systems were the ultimate arbiter of who owned – and hence who did not own – land, and its criminal legislation rigorously defended owners against the hostile attentions of those left out in the economic cold.<sup>59</sup> The fifth-century historian Priscus records a much quoted conversation with a Roman merchant who had fought for the barbarian Huns. The talk ebbed back

and forth on what was good and bad about Roman and Hunnic societies, until Priscus hit the nail on the head:

Amongst the Romans there are many ways of giving freedom. Not only the living but also the dead bestow it lavishly, arranging their estates as they wish; and whatever a man has willed for his possessions at his death is legally binding. My [Roman-turned-Hun] acquaintance wept and said that the laws were fair and the Roman polity was good...

Both parties eventually agreed on two points: first, that Roman law generated a superior society; and second, that its chief beneficial effect was to guarantee the rights of property-holders to dispose of their assets as they saw fit.<sup>60</sup> This wasn't an isolated opinion. Remember the acclamations of the Roman Senate – the senators, too, were pretty clear that the overall effect of the *Theodosian Code* had been to protect 'the rights of landowners' (see p. 128).

A huge amount of Roman law dealt precisely with property: basic ownership, modes of exploiting it (selling, leasing for longer or shorter terms, simple renting and sharecropping), and its transfer between generations through marriage settlements, inheritance and special bequests. The ferocity of Roman criminal law, likewise, protected ownership: death was the main punishment for theft – certainly, for anything beyond petty pilfering. Again, we can see a resemblance here to later 'genteel' societies based on similarly unequal distributions of landed wealth in an overwhelmingly agricultural economy. When Jane Austen was writing her elegant tales of love, marriage and property transfer, you could be whipped (for theft valued at up to 10d), branded (for theft up to 4s 10d) or hanged (theft over 5 shillings). In eighteenth-century London an average of twenty people were hanged each year.<sup>61</sup>

The Roman state had to advance and protect the interests of these landowning classes because they were, in large measure, the same people who participated in its political structures. This didn't mean that there weren't occasional conflicts between the state and individual landowners, or even whole groups of them. Landowning families sometimes lost their estates by confiscation if they ended up on the wrong side of a political dispute, for instance. (This didn't necessarily mean that they were ruined for ever: as in the medieval world, restoring confiscated lands was a favoured way for a subsequent ruler to win a family's loyalty.<sup>62</sup>) Nonetheless, as we have seen, the state



relied on the administrative input of its provincial landowning classes at all levels of the governmental machine, and in particular to collect its taxes – the efficient collection of which hung on the willingness of these same landed classes to pay up.

This delicate balance manifested itself in two ways. First, and most obviously, taxes on agriculture could not rise so high that landowners would opt out of the state system en masse and attempt to frustrate its operation. As we have seen, there is plenty of evidence that emperors were aware that the way to a landowner's heart was to tax gently. In the mid-360s, the emperors Valentinian and Valens started their joint reign with a financial charm offensive. Taxes were held stable for three years, then cut in the fourth, because, as their spokesman put it, 'a light hand in taxation is a boon shared by all who are nurtured by the earth'. With a (very modern) flourish, they also promised, 'if revenues turned out as expected', to cut them again in the fifth.<sup>49</sup> Second, the landowners' elite status and lifestyles depended upon a property distribution so unequal that the have-nots had a massive numerical advantage – which should surely have led to a redistribution of wealth unless some other body prevented it. In the fourth century, this other body was, as it had been for centuries, the Roman state. Landowners could generally rely on its ability to counterbalance their numerical weakness by enforcing the laws in their favour. If the state ceased to be able to do this – should it, for instance, start to lack the brute power to enforce its property laws – then landowners would have no choice but to search for another agency that could perform the same role in its place.

We might understand the participation of the landowners in the Roman system, therefore, as a cost-benefit equation. What it cost them was the money they paid annually into the state coffers. What they got in return was protection for the wealth on which their status was based. In the fourth century, benefit hugely outweighed cost. But, as we shall see, should the taxman become too demanding, or the state incapable of providing protection, then the loyalty of the landowning class could be up for renegotiation.

### The Balance Sheet

IT HAS BEEN a long journey of discovery, but the evolution of the Roman Empire up to about AD 300 is finally coming into focus. On the one hand, we are dealing with an historical phenomenon of extraordinary power. Built originally on military might, the Empire deployed, across the vastness separating Hadrian's Wall from the Euphrates, an all-encompassing ideology of superiority. By the fourth century, subjected peoples had so internalized the Roman way of life that the original conquest state had evolved into a commonwealth of thoroughly Roman provincial communities.

But this extraordinary state also had major drawbacks. Distance, primitive communications and a limited capacity to process data hamstrung the operation of its systems. Except in the field of taxation, the state was fundamentally reactive, generally drawn into situations by groups seeking to take advantage of its power. Its economy produced an output not much above subsistence. And in political terms, the number of people clearly benefiting from the Empire's existence was small. (We have just glimpsed the massively privileged lives led by the small Roman landowning class.)

For all this, there is no sign in the fourth century that the Empire was about to collapse. The adjustment called for after fifty years of turmoil caused by the rise of Sasanian Persia was neither straightforward nor easy, but a military, financial, political and bureaucratic transformation did at last, more or less organically, generate an enlarged state machine capable of dealing at one and the same time with Persia and with the consequences of 300 years of internal evolution. There was, of course, a price to be paid. The state confiscated local funds, breaking up the unity of the old self-governing towns. It also proved necessary to divide the ultimate power between two or more individuals, even though this could not but generate regular tension and periodic civil war.

Nonetheless, the late Empire was essentially a success story. The rural economy was mostly flourishing, and unprecedented numbers of landowners were keen to fill the offices of state. As the response to the Persians showed, the Roman imperial structure was inherently rigid, with only a limited and slow-moving bureaucratic, economic and political capacity to mobilize resources in the face of a new threat. But

the Persian challenge had been successfully seen off, and the overwhelming impression the Roman state gave was one of continuing unmatched power. It was not, however, destined to be left to its own devices. While fourth-century Romans continued to look on Persia as the traditional enemy, a second major strategic revolution was about to unfold to the north.

## PART TWO

# CRISIS

## WAR ON THE DANUBE

IN THE WINTER OF 375/6, rumour reached Rome's Danube frontier that heavy fighting was under way in eastern Germania north of the Black Sea. Ammianus Marcellinus reports:<sup>1</sup> 'In the beginning the news was viewed with contempt by our people because wars in those districts were not ordinarily heard of by those living at a distance until they were either over, or had at least died down for a time.' You could hardly blame the imperial authorities for not taking the matter too seriously. The migration of the Goths and other Germani in the mid-third century had prompted a political reconfiguration that had led to a hundred years of relative stability in the region. Moreover, the trouble then had come from the north-west (present-day Poland and Byelorussia), not the north-east (modern Ukraine). The last time the north-east had posed a problem was when the Sarmatians had swept all before them in the fifty years either side of the birth of Christ, three centuries earlier. But the Romans quickly learned the error of their ways.

In the summer of 376, a vast throng of people – men, women and children – suddenly appeared on the north bank of the River Danube asking for safe haven in Roman territory. One source, not our best, reports that 200,000 refugees appeared beside the river; Ammianus, that there were too many to count. They came with innumerable wagons and the animals to pull them, presumably their plough-oxen, in the kind of huge procession that warfare has generated throughout history. There were certainly many individual refugees and small family groups, but the vast majority were Goths organized in two compact masses and with defined political leaderships. My own best guess is that each was composed of about 10,000 warriors. One group, the Greuthungi, had already moved a fair distance from lands east of the River Dniester, in the present-day Ukraine, hundreds of kilometres from the Danube. The other comprised the majority of Athanaric's Tervingi, now led by Alavivus and Fritigern, who had broken away from their former leader's control to come here to the river.<sup>2</sup>

If the size of the immediate problem for Roman frontier security was bad enough, the refugees' identity was even more ominous. Though the first reports had concerned fighting a long way from the frontier zone, the two large bodies of Gothic would-be immigrants camped beside the river were from much closer to home. The Tervingi, in particular, had been occupying lands immediately north of the Danube, in what is now Wallachia and Moldavia, since the 310s at the latest. Whatever was going on in the far north-east was no local skirmish; its effects were being felt throughout the region north of the Black Sea.

The Romans quickly learned what lay behind all the mayhem. Again in Ammianus' words: 'The seed-bed and origin of all this destruction and of the various calamities inflicted by the wrath of Mars, which raged everywhere with extraordinary fury, I find to be this: the people of the Huns.'

Ammianus was writing nearly twenty years later, by which time the Romans had a better understanding of what had brought the Goths to the Danube. Even in the 390s, though, the full effects of the arrival of the Huns were far from apparent. The appearance of the Goths beside the river in the summer of 376 was the first link in a chain of events that would lead directly from the rise of Hunnic power on the fringes of Europe to the deposition of the last western emperor, Romulus Augustulus, almost exactly one hundred years later. None of this was even remotely conceivable in 376, and there would be many twists and turns on the way. The arrival of Goths on the Danube marked the start of a reshuffling of Europe-wide balances of power, and it is to this story that the rest of the book is devoted. We must begin, like Ammianus, with the Huns.

### *From the 'Ice-Bound Ocean'*

THE ORIGINS OF the Huns are mysterious and controversial. The one thing we know for certain is that they were nomads from the Great Eurasian Steppe.<sup>1</sup> The Eurasian Steppe is a huge expanse, stretching about 5,500 kilometres from the fringes of Europe to western China, with another 3,000 kilometres to its north and east. The north-south depth of the steppe ranges from only about 500 kilometres in the west to nearly 3,000 in the wide-open plains of Mongolia. Geography and

climate dictate the nomadic lifestyle. Natural steppe grasslands are the product of poorish soils and limited rainfall, which make it impossible, in general terms, for trees and more luxurious vegetation to grow. The lack of rainfall also rules out arable farming of any sustained kind, so that the nomad makes a substantial part of his living from pastoral agriculture, herding a range of animals suited to the available grazing. Cattle can survive on worse pasture than horses, sheep on worse pasture than cattle, and goats on worse than sheep. Camels will eat anything left over.

Nomadism is essentially a means of assembling distinct blocks of pasture, which between them add up to a year-round grazing strategy. Typically, modern nomads will move between upland summer pasture (where there is no grass in the winter because of snow and cold) and lowland winter pasture (where the lack of rain in summer means, again, no grass). In this world, grazing rights are as important in terms of economic capital as the herds, and as jealously guarded. The distance between summer and winter pasture needs to be minimal, since all movement is hard both on the animals and on the weaker members of the human population. Before Stalin sedentarized them, the nomads of Kazakhstan tended to move about 75 kilometres each way between their pastures. Nomadic societies also form close economic ties with settled arable farmers in the region, from whom they obtain much of the grain they need, though some they produce themselves. While part of the population cycles the herds around the summer pastures, the rest engage in other types of food production. But all the historically observed nomad populations have needed to supplement their grain production by exchanging with arable populations the surplus generated from their herds (hides, cheese and yoghurt, actual animals and so on). Often, this exchange has been one-sided, with the arable population getting in return no more than exemption from being raided, but sometimes the exchange has been properly reciprocal.

Nomadism, or part-nomadism, has never been the preserve of any particular linguistic or cultural population group. Across the Great Eurasian Steppe many peoples have, at different times, adopted nomadic lifestyles. In the first three centuries AD the western end of the steppe – from the Caspian Sea to the Danube – was dominated by Iranian-speaking Sarmatian and Alan nomads. These had ousted Scythian nomads, also Iranian-speaking, in the last two or three centuries BC. By the sixth century AD at the latest, Turkic-speaking nomads were

dominant from the Danube to China, and a Mongol-speaking nomad horde would cause untold devastation in the high Middle Ages. Other population groups, too, took to nomadism. The Magyars who arrived in central Europe at the end of the ninth century spoke – as their Hungarian descendants still do – a Finno-Ugrian language that suggests they may have come from the forest zone of north-eastern Europe, the only other region where such languages are spoken.

Where the Huns fit into this sea of cultural possibilities is unclear. Ammianus Marcellinus knew more about them than did our other Roman sources, but he didn't know much. His best shot is that they came from beyond the Black Sea 'near the ice-bound ocean'. They were not literate, so leave us no records of their own to go on, and even their language affiliation is mysterious. Failing all else, linguists can usually decode basic linguistic affiliations from personal names, but even this doesn't work with the Huns. They quickly got into the habit of using Germanic names (or perhaps our sources preserve the Germanicized versions or Germanic nicknames given them by their Germanic neighbours and subjects), so that the stock of properly Hunnic personal names is much too small to draw any convincing conclusions. They were probably not Iranian-speaking, but whether they were the first Turkic-speaking nomads to explode on to the European scene, as some have argued, remains unclear.<sup>4</sup> With such pathetic sources of information, Hunnic origins can only remain mysterious, but a little spice has been added by a famous controversy over whether the Huns were in fact the nomadic Hsiung-Nu, well known from imperial Chinese records.

In the centuries before and after the birth of Christ, the Hsiung-Nu – under the leadership of their Shan-Yu<sup>5</sup> – harassed the north-west frontiers of Han China, extracting from it huge quantities of tribute in silks, precious metals and grain. They also contested the control of some of its important western territories, particularly the Tarim Basin where the Silk Road (which started to operate in the last century BC) reaches China. Under pressure from Han armies, they split in AD 48 into northern and southern branches. The southern Hsiung-Nu were subsequently brought into the Chinese orbit, becoming an important force within the imperial system. The northerners remained external, independent and highly troublesome until AD 93, when the Chinese government paid another nomadic group, the Hsien-Pi, to launch a devastating attack upon their homelands. Many northern Hsiung-Nu

(reportedly 100,000 households) were absorbed into the victorious Hsien-Pi confederation, but others fled 'to the west'. That's the last we ever hear of the northern Hsiung-Nu in the Chinese records.

The Huns we're concerned with appear suddenly in Roman records in the third quarter of the fourth century. The problem inherent in the superficially attractive equation of these people with the Hsiung-Nu is this: we have gaps between the Chinese and Roman records of nearly 300 years (AD 93 to about 370) and 3,500 kilometres to account for. Moreover, the Huns known to the Romans had a completely different form of political organization from the Hsiung-Nu's. After AD 48, both branches of the latter had their own Shan-Yu, but the Huns arrived in Europe with a multiplicity of ranked kings and no sign of one dominant figure. The surviving ethnographic descriptions – such as they are – also raise objections. The Hsiung-Nu customarily wore their hair in a long pony-tail; the Huns did not. The two groups used similar weaponry, and bronze kettles are customarily found among their archaeological remains. Given this, there may be some connection, but it clearly won't do just to say that the Hsiung-Nu had started running west in AD 93 and kept going until they hit Europe as the Huns. The Great Eurasian Steppe is a vast place, but it didn't, even then, take 300 years to cross. Equally, like most nomadic empires, that of the Hsiung-Nu was a confederation, comprising a smallish Hsiung-Nu core and many other subject groups. The ancestors of our Huns could even have been part of the confederation, therefore, without being 'real' Hsiung-Nu. Even if we do make some connection between fourth-century Huns and first-century Hsiung-Nu, therefore, an awful lot of water had passed under an awful lot of bridges during 300 years worth of lost history.<sup>6</sup>

Roman sources also give us only a very general idea of what brought the Huns to the fringes of Europe. For Ammianus, it was enough just to point out that they exceeded 'every measure of savagery' and 'were aflame with an inhuman desire for plundering others' property'. The most commonly repeated story in the Roman sources claimed their landing up at Europe's gates was partly an accident. Some Hunnic hunters, out after game one day, trailed a hind through a marsh into new lands of which they had previously been ignorant. This kind of tale rubbed off on early twentieth-century commentators, who tended to suppose that the Huns had for centuries been engaged in nomadic wanderings in different parts of the Eurasian



Steppe, and one year just happened to wander on to the fringes of Europe.<sup>7</sup> But this was before anthropologists understood quite so clearly that nomads do not wander around at random, but move cyclically between carefully designated pastures. Given that move rights are a key element in nomad subsistence, and guarded so jealously, shifting from one set of pastures to another could never be an accident.

Unfortunately, we can only guess at the motives behind the Huns' decision to shift their centre of operations westwards. The story of the hind concludes with the hunters telling the rest of the Huns of the wonders of the new land they'd found, and Ammianus, too, picked out the motive of economic gain. The idea that it was the wealth of the northern shores of the Black Sea that attracted Hunnic attentions is perfectly plausible. While less extensive, the grazing lands of the western steppe are rich, and have attracted many a nomad group over the years. The area north of the Black Sea was occupied by client groups of the Roman Empire, who benefited economically from different relationships with the Mediterranean world, and there is no reason to doubt that Huns also felt its call. At the same time, in the case of some later nomad groups for whom we have more information, a move on to the western edge of the steppe was often associated with the desire to escape a more powerful nomad confederation operating towards China. The Avars, who would have much the same kind of impact on Europe as the Huns, but two centuries later, were looking for a safe haven beyond the reach of the western Turks, when they appeared north of the Black Sea. At the end of the ninth century, likewise, the nomadic Magyars would move into Hungary because another nomad group, the Pechenegs, was making life intolerable for them further east. In the case of the Huns, we have no firm indication that a negative as well as a positive motivation was at work, but we can't rule it out. Further east, in the later fourth century, the Guptas were pushing on to the Silk Road from northern India, and by the early to mid-fifth century the Hephthalite Huns were ruling the roost somewhere between the Caspian and Aral Seas. As early as the 350s, this reconfiguration of the balance of power was reverberating further east on the steppe, causing the Chionitae to move into the fringes of the Persian Empire, east of the Caspian Sea.<sup>8</sup> It may also have played a role in the Huns' decision to shift their grazing lands westwards.

Mysterious as the Huns' origins and animating forces may remain, there is no doubt at all that they were behind the strategic revolution that brought the Goths to the Danube in the summer of 376. It is normally assumed that at that time they were fleeing from Huns who had suddenly exploded en masse on to the northern Black Sea littoral. It is further assumed that these Huns were virtually breathing down the Goths' necks as they scrambled for the Danube in the hope of securing asylum inside the Empire, and that, once the Goths had reached Roman territory, the Huns immediately became the dominant power in the lands adjacent to the river. This is what you will find stated more or less explicitly in most modern accounts: Huns arrive suddenly (375/6); Goths leave in panic for the Empire (376); Huns become dominant beside the Danube (from 376).

This pattern is based on the account given by Ammianus, who paints a highly convincing picture of Gothic panic: 'The report spread widely among the other Gothic peoples that a race of men hitherto unknown had now arisen from a hidden nook of the earth, like a tempest of snows from the high mountains, and was seizing or destroying everything in its way.' We need to look past the rhetoric, however, at what Ammianus is actually telling us. After first subjugating the Alans, the Huns then started attacking the Gothic Greuthungi. The resistance of the Greuthungi was led by Ermenaric, who eventually gave up and seems to have allowed himself to be ritually sacrificed for the safety of his people.<sup>9</sup> Ammianus' wording is a little vague, but the reflex, documented among several ancient groups, to hold their political leadership responsible for the fate of the group, is an interesting one. When times got tough, it was seen as a sign from the gods that the old leader had offended them and needed to be sacrificed in propitiation of the offence. Ermenaric was succeeded by Vithimer, who carried on the fight but was eventually killed in battle.

At this point, control of the Greuthungi passed to two military leaders, Alatheus and Saphrax, who ruled in the name of Vithimer's son Vitheric. Having decided to retreat to the banks of the River Dniester, they were met there by a force of Tervingi under Athanaric. But Athanaric was now attacked from the rear by some Huns, who had found an alternative ford over the river, and retreated back to his heartlands closer to the Carpathian Mountains. There he attempted to stem the Hunnic tide by constructing a fortified line against them. In

my view, this was probably the old Roman walls on the River Oit, the Limes Transalutanus.<sup>10</sup> But the plan came to naught. The Tervingi were harassed by more Hunnic attacks as they worked on the defences, which damaged their confidence in Athanaric's leadership. Most of the Tervingi broke with him at this point, and under new leaders, Alavivus and Fritigern, came to the Danube to request asylum inside the Roman Empire. The Greuthungi of Alatheus and Saphrax opted for a similar strategy, following the Tervingi to the river (map 5).<sup>11</sup>

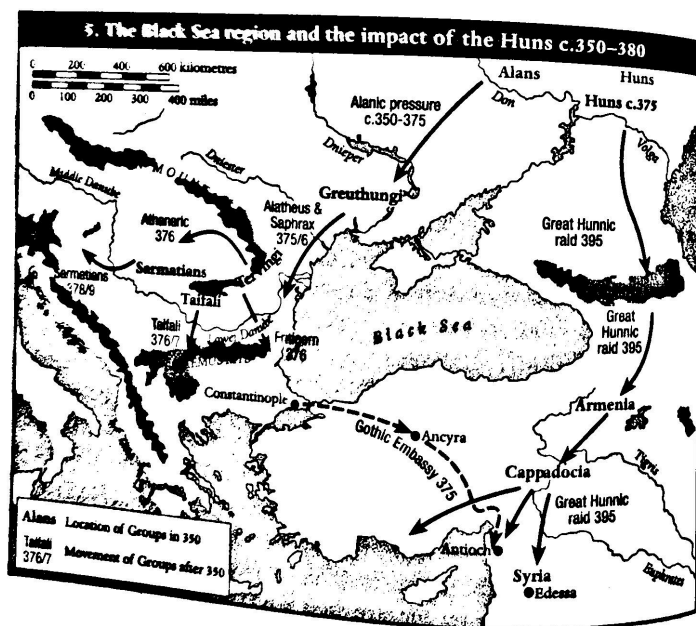
Some of these events unfolded very quickly. From the death of Vithimer in battle, the action is pretty continuous down to the arrival of both Tervingi and Greuthungi on the banks of the Danube. Even in its entirety, this sequence needn't have occupied any great length of time. If, as seems likely, the Goths arrived sometime in late summer or early autumn 376, then Vithimer's death need be placed no more than a year before. In principle, even a few months would have been sufficient for the intervening events, which would place Vithimer's death between mid-375 and early 376. Given that a good time for agriculturalists to move on is after they've taken in the harvest, it was

perhaps most likely late summer or early autumn 375 that the Greuthungi took to the road.<sup>12</sup>

This somewhat breathless last act, however, followed a more measured drama. It is impossible to date precisely, because Ammianus gives us only vague indications of time; but what he does tell us is suggestive. He states, first of all, that Ermenaric resisted the storm brewed up by the Huns 'for a long time' (*diu*). We also hear that Ermenaric's successor Vithimer fought 'many engagements' (*multas... clades*) against the Huns until he was killed in battle. There is obviously no way to be sure how long all this took, but the swift denouement which followed Vithimer's death clearly ended a longer struggle, and it was the Greuthungi's decision to move that precipitated the final crisis. How far back in time the preceding struggle might have gone on is a matter of judgement, but the nature of Hunnic operations does have a bearing on the argument.

To secure their entry to the Empire, first of all, Gothic embassies left the banks of the Danube to seek out the emperor Valens and put their case. Valens, however, was in Antioch – which meant a round trip of over 1,000 kilometres; even so the ambassadors were not deterred. Once they reached Antioch, the two parties had to confer and decisions had to be made, then communicated back to the Roman commanders on the Danube. All of this must have taken well over a month, during which time the mass of Goths continued to sit beside the river, more or less patiently, waiting for the green light to cross. There is no record of any Hunnic attacks upon them during this period. Furthermore, the Huns who attacked Athanaric came in small groups, sometimes weighed down by booty:<sup>13</sup> raiders, therefore, rather than conquerors. The Huns' political organization at this date didn't run to an overall leader but comprised a series of ranked kings with plenty of capacity for independent action. When he was trying to fend off the Greuthungi's Hun-generated military problems, for instance, Vithimer was able to recruit other Huns to fight on his side.<sup>14</sup> In 375/6, there was no massive horde of Huns hotly pursuing the fleeing Goths: rather, independent Hunnic warbands were pursuing a variety of strategies against a variety of opponents.

What was happening, then, was not that a force of Huns *conquered* the Goths in the sense we normally understand the word, but that some Goths decided to evacuate a world that was becoming ever more insecure. As late as 395, some twenty years later, the mass of Huns



remained further east – much closer, in fact, to the northern exit of the Caucasus than to the mouth of the Danube.<sup>15</sup> And it was other Gothic groups, in fact, not the Tervingi or Greuthungi, who continued to provide Rome with its main opposition on the Lower Danube frontier for a decade or more after 376. The Romans had to deal with a heavy assault on the same front launched by a second force of Greuthungi under one Odotheus in 386; and still more Goths – perhaps the leftover Tervingi who hadn't followed Alavivus and Fritigern to the Danube – were operating somewhere in the Carpathian area at much the same time.

### *The Golden Bow*

NONE OF THIS MAKES the arrival of the Huns any less revolutionary. While small-scale trouble was endemic to the Danube frontier, as everywhere else, strategic revolution was rare. Roman imperial history had seen only two such moments in the northern Black Sea region. A varied climate and ecology is one of the area's chief peculiarities. Between the Carpathians and the Don there is enough water, particularly in the river valleys, to support arable agriculture, but east of the Don grain cannot be grown without irrigation. At the same time, the southern part between the Carpathians and the Don, just beyond the Black Sea coastal strip, is dry enough to generate steppe conditions. In this fringe of Europe, adjacent areas are ecologically suited, therefore, to nomads and agriculturalists and, in antiquity, the region was dominated by first one type of population group and then the other. Alongside the Scythian nomads, Germanic-speaking agriculturalists, Bastarnae and others, had thrived in the last few centuries BC. Their domination was broken by nomadic Iranian-speaking Sarmatians around the year zero. Two hundred years later agricultural Goths pushed south and east around the Carpathians, extending their domain as far east as the Don, subduing those Sarmatians who remained. What was it about the Huns, then, that allowed them in the later fourth century to redress the military balance in favour of the nomadic world?

The Romans quickly came to appreciate where the military strength of the Huns lay. Ammianus describes no Hunnic battle in detail, but leaves us this general description that gets straight to the point:

[The Huns] enter battle drawn up in wedge-shaped masses . . . And as they are lightly equipped for swift motion, and unexpected in action, they purposely divide suddenly into scattered bands and attack, rushing about in disorder here and there, dealing terrific slaughter . . . They fight from a distance with missiles having sharp bone, instead of their usual points, joined to the shafts with wonderful skill; then they gallop over the intervening spaces and fight hand to hand with swords.

Zosimus, a sixth-century writer drawing on the account of the fourth-century historian Eunapius, is equally vivid: '[The Huns] were totally incapable and ignorant of conducting a battle on foot, but by wheeling, charging, retreating in good time and shooting from their horses, they wrought immense slaughter.'<sup>16</sup> These Roman commentators leave no room for doubt. The Huns were cavalry, and above all horse archers, who were able to engage at a safe distance until their opponents lost formation and cohesion. At this point, the Huns would move in for the kill with either bow or sabre. The essential ingredients in all this were skilled archery and horsemanship, the capacity to work together in small groups, and ferocious courage. As many have commented, and as was demonstrated repeatedly in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, the Eurasian pastoralist's life was a hard one, and the kinds of skills, not to mention the magnificent horses, a nomad required for everyday existence set him up equally well for battle.

But this was true of all Eurasian nomads, and doesn't really explain why the Huns were particularly successful. As well as the Germanic Goths, they were also able to defeat fellow nomads, such as the Iranian-speaking Alans. What gave them the edge? Both were renowned horsemen, but they fought in different ways. Whereas the Huns, as relatively lightly equipped horse archers, set a high value on manoeuvrability, the Alans, like the Sarmatians in general, specialized in heavy cavalry – cataphracts, as the Romans called them. Both rider and horse were protected; the rider's main weapon was the lance, supplemented with a long cavalry sabre, and the lancers operated in a compact mass. This narrows the question down further. For the Scythians, whom the Sarmatians replaced as the dominant power north of the Black Sea in the early imperial period, had been horse archers, just like the Huns, and employed very similar tactics – but at that

point, lance had prevailed over bow. Why, three centuries later, did the balance tilt in favour of the bow?

The answer doesn't lie in the basic construction of the bow the Huns used. Both Huns and Scythians used the so-called 'wonder weapon of the steppe'. When we in the West think of bows, we usually have in mind 'self' bows, made of a single stave of wood and assuming a simple concave shape when put under tension. Steppe bows were completely different. To start with, they were composite. Separate sections of wood provided a frame for the other constituent parts: sinew on the outside that would stretch, and bone plates on the inside that would be compressed, when the bow was tensed. Unstrung, these bows also curved in the reverse direction: hence the weapon's other name, the recurve bow. Wood, sinew and bone were glued together with the most powerful adhesive that could be concocted from fishbone and animal hide, and when fully seasoned the bow's hitting power was tremendous. Remains of such bows (usually the bone plates) have been found in graves from the Lake Balkhash region dating back to the third millennium BC. So by the fourth AD, it was hardly a new weapon.

The key to Hunnic success seems to lie in one particular detail whose significance has not been fully recognized. Both the Huns and the Scythians used the composite bow, then, but whereas Scythian bows measured about 80 centimetres in length, the few Hunnic bows found in graves are much larger, measuring between 130 and 160 centimetres. The point here, of course, is that size generates power. However, the maximum size of bow that a cavalryman can comfortably use is only about 100 centimetres. The bow was held out, upright, directly in front of the rider, so that a longer bow would bang into the horse's neck or get caught up in the reins. But – and here is the answer to our question – Hunnic bows were asymmetric. The half below the handle was shorter than the half above, and it is this that allowed the longer bow to be used from horseback. It involved a trade-off, of course. The longer bow was clumsier and its asymmetry called for adjustments in aim on the part of the archer. But the Huns' asymmetric 130-centimetre bow generated considerably more hitting power than the Scythians' symmetrical 80-centimetre counterpart: unlike the Scythians', it could penetrate Sarmatian armour while keeping the archer at a safe distance and not impeding his horsemanship.

Some idea of what it was like to use the recurve, or reflex, bow

can be derived from trials with composite 'Turkish' bows in the early modern and modern periods. These were generally about 110 centimetres in length, but symmetric, since they were made for infantry rather than cavalry. They were also the product, of course, of a further millennium of development, outperforming larger Chinese and Asian bows of the same basic design. Their performance certainly startled Europeans, used to 'self' bows. In 1753 the best shot before the modern era, Hassan Aga, launched an arrow a grand total of 584 yards and 1 foot (roughly 534 metres). He was a renowned champion, but distances of well over 400 metres were commonplace. This bow's power, too, is awesome. From just over 100 metres' distance, a Turkish bow will drive an arrow over 5 centimetres through a piece of wood 1.25 centimetres thick. Because of its asymmetry and the fact that infantry archers can plant their feet firmly, unlike their mounted counterparts, we need to knock something off these performance figures when thinking about what they tell us about the fourth century. The Huns didn't have stirrups, but used heavy wooden saddles which allowed the rider to grip with the leg muscles and thus create a firm firing platform. Nonetheless, Hunnic horse archers would probably have been effective against unarmoured opponents such as the Goths from distances of 150 to 200 metres, and against protected Alans from 75 to 100 metres. These distances were more than enough to give the Huns a huge tactical advantage, which, as Roman sources report, they exploited to the full.<sup>17</sup>

The bow wasn't the Huns' only weapon. Having destroyed the cohesion of an enemy's formation from a distance, their cavalry would then close in to engage with their swords, and they often used lassos, too, to disable individual opponents. There is also some evidence that high-status Huns wore coats of mail. But the reflex bow was their *pièce de résistance*. Carefully adapted, by the mid-fourth century it could face down the challenge of the Sarmatian cataphracts. The Huns, as you might expect, were well aware of their bows' uniqueness, as slightly later sources, dating to the fifth century, attest. The historian Olympiodorus of Thebes tells us that in about 410 Hunnic kings prided themselves on their archery skills,<sup>18</sup> and there is no reason to suppose that this was not already the case in 375. On the night that the greatest Hun of all – Attila – died, the Roman emperor Marcian dreamt that 'a divine figure stood by him and showed him the bow of Attila broken that night'.<sup>19</sup> And the archaeological record confirms, likewise, that the

Hunnic bow was a symbol of supreme authority. In four burial sites the remains of bows entirely or partly encased in engraved gold sheets have been found. One was entirely symbolic: only 80 centimetres long, it was covered with so much gold that it could not have been flexed. The other three were full length, and it's possible that here we are looking at real weapons with gold casings.<sup>20</sup> Thus embellished, the source of the Huns' military dominance became a potent image of political power. It also allowed them to dominate the western edge of the Great Eurasian Steppe.

Ammianus Marcellinus was right. It was the Huns who were behind the military revolution that had brought the Tervingi and Greuthungi to the Danube sometime in the late summer or early autumn of 376. At this point, the rise of Hunnic power ceased to be a problem for the peoples of the northern shores of the Black Sea exclusively. It now presented the eastern emperor Valens with a huge dilemma. Tens of thousands of displaced Goths had suddenly arrived on his borders and were requesting asylum.

### Asylum Seekers

WITH A RARE UNANIMITY, the vast majority of our sources report that this sudden surge of would-be Gothic immigrants wasn't seen as a problem at all. On the contrary, Valens happily admitted them because he saw in this flood of displaced humanity a great opportunity. To quote Ammianus again – but most other sources tell a similar story:

The affair caused more joy than fear and educated flatterers immoderately praised the good fortune of the prince, which unexpectedly brought him so many young recruits from the ends of the earth, that by the union of his own and foreign forces he would have an invincible army. In addition, instead of the levy of soldiers, which was contributed annually by each province, there would accrue to the treasury a vast amount of gold.

Thus soldiers and gold both at the same time – usually you got one or the other. No wonder Valens was pleased.

Most of the sources also give a broadly similar account of what went wrong after the Goths crossed the river (probably at or around the fortress of Durostorum (map 6). The blame for what happened

next is placed mostly on the dishonesty of the Roman officials on the spot. For once the immigrants started to run short of supplies, these officials exploited their increasing desperation to run a highly profitable black market, taking slaves from them in return for food. Unsurprisingly, this generated huge resentment, which the Roman military, especially one Lupicinus, commander of the field forces in Thrace (comes Thraciae), only exacerbated. Having first profited from the black market, then having made the Goths move on to a second camp outside his regional headquarters at Marcianople (map 6), he made a botched attack on their leadership, at a banquet supposedly given in their honour. This pushed the Goths from resentment to revolt.<sup>21</sup> So the story goes, and so it has often been repeated by historians. Blaming Valens for his stupidity in agreeing to admit the Goths, the local Roman military for their greed, and the Goths – just a bit – for resorting to violence makes for a perfectly coherent account. Considered in all its details, however, it is not the whole truth.

Take, to begin with, normal Roman policy towards asylum seekers. Immigrants, willing or otherwise, in 376 were a far from new phenomenon for the Roman Empire. Throughout its history, it had taken in outsiders: a constant stream of individuals looking to make their fortune (not least, as we have seen, in the Roman army), supplemented by occasional large-scale migrations. There was even a technical term for the latter: *receptio*. An inscription from the first century AD records that Nero's governor transported 100,000 people 'from across [north of] the Danube' (*transdanuviani*) into Thrace. As recently as AD 300, the tetrarchic emperors had resettled tens of thousands of Dacian Carpi inside the Empire, dispersing them in communities the length of the Danube, from Hungary to the Black Sea. There had been a number of similar influxes in between, and while there was no single blueprint for how immigrants were to be treated, clear patterns emerge. If relations between the Empire and the would-be asylum seekers were good, and the immigration happening by mutual consent, then some of the young adult males would be drafted into the Roman army, sometimes forming a single new unit, and the rest distributed fairly widely across the Empire as free peasant cultivators who would henceforth pay taxes. This was the kind of arrangement agreed between the emperor Constantius II and some Sarmatian Limigantes, for instance, in 359.<sup>22</sup> If relations between the Empire and migrants were not so good, and, in particular, if they'd been captured during



military operations, treatment was much harsher. Some might still be drafted into the army, though often with greater safeguards imposed. An imperial edict dealing with a force of Sciri captured by the Romans in 409, for instance, records that twenty-five years – that is, a generation – should pass before any of them could be recruited. The rest, again, became peasant cultivators, but on less favourable terms. Many of the Sciri of 409 were sold into slavery, and the rest distributed as unfree peasants (*coloni*), with the stipulation that they had to be moved to points outside the Balkans, where they had been captured. All immigrants became soldiers or peasants, then, but there were more and less pleasant ways of effecting it.<sup>23</sup>

There is, however, another common denominator to all documented cases of licensed immigration into the Empire. Emperors never admitted immigrants on trust. They *always* made sure that they were militarily in control of proceedings, either through having defeated the would-be immigrants first, or by having sufficient force on hand to deal with any trouble. Constantius and the Limigantes provide a case in point. In 359, something went badly wrong. True to form, Ammianus puts it down to bad faith on the part of the Sarmatians, but the causes may have been more complex. Be that as it may, all hell broke loose at a crucial moment:

When the emperor was seen on the high tribunal and was already preparing to deliver a most mild address, intending to speak to [the Sarmatians] as future obedient subjects, one of their number struck with savage madness, hurling his shoe at the tribunal, shouted 'Marha, marha' (which is their warcry), and the rude crowd following him suddenly raised a barbarian banner and with savage howls rushed upon the emperor himself.

What happened next is very revealing:

Although the attack was so sudden that they were only partly armed, with a loud battlecry [the Roman forces] plunged into the bands of the savages . . . They butchered everything in their way, trampling under foot without mercy the living, as well as those dying or dead . . . The rebels were completely overthrown, some being slain, others fleeing in terror in all directions, and a part of them who hoped to save their lives by vain entreaties, were cut down by repeated strokes.

The Limigantes' acceptance on to Roman soil had been carefully negotiated before Constantius showed himself, so all should have been well. But when it wasn't, there were plenty of Roman troops to hand and it was the Limigantes who were wiped out.<sup>24</sup>

This highlights a key element in the generally accepted account of what happened in 376 that just doesn't ring true. Valens, we are told, was filled with joy at the Goths' arrival on the Danube. But in 376 the Roman army was demonstrably not in charge of the situation, and when things started to go wrong after the crossing, order could not be restored. Lupicinus, whatever his personal culpability for the Goths' revolt, simply didn't have enough troops on hand. After the banquet, he immediately rushed his available forces into battle against the rebellious Goths and was soundly defeated.<sup>25</sup> In the absence of total military superiority, which was central to normal Roman *receptiones*, it is just not credible that Valens was anything like as happy about the arrival of the Goths on the Danube as the sources claim.

The shortage of Roman troops in the Balkans had a simple enough cause. In the summer of 376, Valens was deeply embroiled on his eastern front, and had been for some time. As we saw in Chapter 3, he had ended his war against Athanaric in 369 with a compromise, because he was needed in the east to deal with Persian ambitions in Armenia and Iberia. After 371, taking advantage of Persia's difficulties in its own far eastern territories, Valens had made some important gains, managing to put Roman nominees in control of these Caucasian territories. By 375, though, Shapur, Persian King of Kings, was back. Determined to hold firm, Valens sent three aggressive embassies in the summer of 376, which told him to back off or expect a fight. Such diplomatic posturing required appropriate military preparations, so that not only had Valens made haste to Antioch, the regional headquarters for Persian campaigns, but the vast majority of his mobile striking forces was in the east as well. When the Goths arrived on the Danube, therefore, Valens was already fully committed to an aggressive policy in the east, and it was bound to take him at least a year to extract his forces diplomatically, or even just to turn them around logistically.<sup>26</sup>

For a while Valens probably still hoped that the Danube crisis could be managed in such a way as to allow him to pursue his Caucasian ambitions, perhaps even with the addition of some extra Gothic military manpower, as the sources report. Given how far the Danubian situation departed from normal Roman expectations of

control, however, we might also expect him to have been treading very carefully, wary of potential problems. And the available evidence shows that he was. As we noted earlier, one thing is clear: of the two Gothic groups who arrived at the Danube, only the Tervingi were admitted.<sup>27</sup> The Greuthungi were refused permission to enter the Empire, and such troops and naval craft as were available in the Balkans were placed opposite them to keep them north of the river.<sup>28</sup> Valens did not, then, rush to accept every Goth he could find so as to build up his army and fill the treasury's coffers at one and the same time.

Let's also have a closer look at his relations with the Tervingi. No source describes the terms agreed with this group in any detail, and, thanks to the rebellion, they were never fully implemented. The new relationship was certainly presented to the Roman public as a Gothic surrender – *editio* – but that in itself tells us little; both Constantine's and Valens' earlier treaties with the Tervingi were described as such when they involved quite different relationships (see pp. 72–6). Everything suggests that the agreement of 376 incorporated some unusual features, highly favourable to the Goths. To start with, they exercised an unusual degree of control over their place of settlement. In normal circumstances, the emperor decided where to place immigrants, tending to spread them out. In 376, it was agreed that the Tervingi should be settled only in Thrace, and this was their choice. The details of how the settlement was to be organized are unclear; in particular, we are left in the dark on the crucial issue of whether they were to be settled in clusters large enough to preserve their political and cultural identity. This would again have been highly unusual, but, given that they were able to choose their own settlement area, may well have been part of the agreement. Otherwise, we know only that hostages were taken, and an immediate draft of young men for the regular Roman army; and that the agreement envisaged the Goths possibly serving en masse as auxiliaries on particular campaigns, much as they had between 332 and 369. There were also some confidence-building measures. In particular, the Tervingi leadership declared itself willing to convert to Christianity.

The fact that the agreement was sold to its Roman audience as a surrender must not confuse the issue. In both its military and its diplomatic details it departed from Roman norms. The Tervingi extracted much better terms in 376 than those usually granted even to

immigrants being treated as friends. Lacking sufficient military clout on the Danube, Valens was forced to depart from tried and trusted Roman methods. We might expect him to have been wary about admitting even the Tervingi, therefore, and there are, in fact, strong hints that he was.<sup>29</sup>

As we've seen, the main cause of the Tervingi's revolt was food shortages and black-marketeering beside the Danube. The Goths, it seems, spent autumn and part of winter 376/7 beside the river, and only moved on to Marcianople sometime in late winter or early spring. Even when the revolt got under way, they still had difficulty in finding food, because 'all the necessities of life had been taken to the strong cities, none of which the enemy even then attempted to besiege because of their complete ignorance of these and other operations of the kind'. This relates to the summer of 377, but long before that year's crops had ripened. The Romans, it would seem, had deliberately moved the harvest of 376 to fortified strongpoints which the Goths lacked the military technology to take. Feeding the hungry Tervingi was anyway a formidable task for the Roman state, given its bureaucratic limitations. It had to plan carefully enough for major military campaigns when its own troops needed feeding. The Goths, of course, had no means of growing their own food at this point, since the agreement hadn't yet got as far as land allocations. Once their stocks had been consumed, securing all other food supplies gave Valens a lever of control over them.

The emperor was also quick to negotiate military assistance from his western colleague, the emperor Gratian, son of his brother Valentinian I. Probably in 377 our old friend Themistius, orator, philosopher, senator of Constantinople and a close confidant of Valens, visited Rome. There he delivered his thirteenth oration. This speech, derivative and uninspired – perhaps delivered on the tenth anniversary of the emperor's accession, which fell in 377 – celebrated Gratian as the Platonic ideal of a ruler. Much more interesting than the speech is the fact that Themistius was present in the west at such an important moment. And, as he makes clear, his journey from Syria had been made at breakneck speed:

... my course was almost equal to the course of the sun, from the Tigris to Ocean [the Atlantic; i.e. the west]; it was an urgent journey, a flight over the surface of the earth, just as you